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JAMES ELROY FLECKER

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

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STREETS: A BOOK OF LONDON VERSES  
THE FORTUNE  
REPUTATIONS  
THE BLACK CURTAIN  
MARGOT'S PROGRESS  
Etc. Etc.





FLECKER, IN HIS ROOMS AT CAMBRIDGE.

*Frontispiece.*

# JAMES ELROY FLECKER

AN APPRECIATION  
WITH SOME BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

BY  
DOUGLAS GOLDRING

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## PREFACE

THE chapters which follow have been written in the confident belief that the subject of them has secured a permanent position in English literary history, that his poetry will be read and admired centuries after those who were his contemporaries have passed away, and that in the years to come generations of poetry-lovers will be eager to know what kind of man he was, what he looked like, what his circle thought of him. It has seemed worth while, therefore, to jot down the impressions and reminiscences of a few of his friends who have been kind enough to search their memories at my request, and to add to this material my own. My excuse for under-

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taking the work is the fact that—first as editor and contributor and then as publisher and author—Flecker and myself were closely associated during the greater part of his literary life, and I was thus fortunate in hearing more of his literary plans and of his ideas about his own poems than most of his other friends, including many who knew him far more intimately than I did.

This small volume certainly makes no pretensions to be described as a “Life” of Flecker; but it will, I trust, be found to contain a certain amount of information which lovers of his poetry will find of interest.

As a complete biography of the poet will doubtless be issued in due course, I have refrained deliberately from tapping many important sources of information. I have, however, gratefully to acknowledge the help which I have received from (among others) vi

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Mr. Henry Danielson, Mr. Frank Savery, Mr. Roger Ingpen, Mr. Trelawney Dayrell-Reed, and Mr. John Mavrogordato. To Mr. Danielson I am expressly indebted for the bibliographical information given at the end of the book.

DOUGLAS GOLDRING.

*May 22nd, 1922.*

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I



# I

**A**PECULIAR glamour surrounds, in retrospect, the fourteen and a half years which separated the end of the 'nineties from the outbreak of the Great War. Looking back, in 1922, those of us who are now in the middle 'thirties can see ourselves playing, all unmindful of our doom, in a world that then seemed almost shadowless. School days, undergraduate days, early manhood—life seemed to grow better and better as the years slipped away which divided us from the great catastrophe. 1913 and the summer of 1914 must always have that historic interest which the human imagination attaches to "last moments."

But if we like to dwell on this queer "pre-war" period, to think about it, to try to get

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it in perspective and disentangle some of the main threads from its jumble of tendencies and ideas, and to keep green the memory of friends who died before the Great Adventure had been revealed to stricken humanity as the Great Illusion, it is not because we wish it back again or are mere praisers of time past. Let us admit that if the present is a period of short commons, bewilderment, and suffering, there is no time like it—except the future. We have struggled through our disasters to man's estate; we are—compared with those of our contemporaries whose lives ended before the war—grown-up. We have gained much in the process, changed our sense of values, become politically “responsible,” realised, however dimly and imperfectly, the human bonds which unite us with our fellow-men and women the world over.

In these circumstances it is only natural that our ideas of Beauty should have

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changed also. The artist of to-day—poet, painter, novelist, sculptor, musician—is dissatisfied with much that might have given him pleasure a decade ago. He seeks more than what is at times contemptuously termed “Beautiful Beauty”; and if he is taunted with accepting ugliness in its place, he can reply that what he seeks is significance—not the pretty Chinese lantern, but the naked light within. So it is that much of the art produced between 1900–14 has become almost unbearable with the passage of years. Reputations have flourished and withered, fashionable figures have had their day and night has covered them: even the war-poets have wilted. If the casualties in regard to reputation are unexpected, the survivors are equally so. Very few can claim to have foretold on the publication of “The Golden Journey to Samarkand” that the status of James Elroy Flecker would be as high as it is to-day.

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If it was the visible world which enthralled Flecker, and if the beauty that he sought to create was an obvious, almost a tangible beauty, he had at least the advantage of never being fashionable, and he had that quality of queerly detached effort which differentiates the “pains” taken by genius from those which are taken by talent. He worked at his poems for his poems’ sake; was deliberately ascetic and austere in regard to his art; deliberately objective. He suppressed ephemeral emotion, just as he suppressed the ephemeral “message,” fashionable philosophy, or what-not. And so, with everything of a merely momentary significance expunged, the precious metal of his verse has survived, has held its own and will continue to be treasured perhaps as long as our language lasts.

Having said this much, it must be added that James Elroy Flecker was at the same time peculiarly the product of his age. He

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was definitely, entirely “pre-war.” He died with the pre-war public schoolboy’s idea of war undamaged, intact, and the dying embers of his life were waked into their final flame by its fierce breath. But if his work is (as I believe) of a lasting worth, then like some masterpiece of Greek sculpture, it will be found to epitomise its period and will give the historian of the future some valuable clues as to the nature and character of the age in which he lived.

At present we are very much too near the decade in which Flecker grew to manhood, wrote and died, to be able to do more than speculate, very tentatively, as to what may subsequently appear to have been its salient features. It was a strange period. It saw the birth of the *English Review*, the rise to fame of John Masefield and Walter de la Mare, of Mr. Granville Barker and Joseph Conrad. George Bernard Shaw and H. G. Wells

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produced in it a good deal of their finest work ; it witnessed a cult of the open air and the open road ; of nut cutlets and no hats, and—at all events, at Oxford—a tremendous cult of the eighteen-'nineties, of Wilde, of Beardsley, of Verlaine, Baudelaire, and Ernest Dowson. Another dominating influence on English poetry during the period was A. E. Housman. Theatrical interest was divided between the imported musical comedies staged so superbly by the late Mr. George Edwardes (who that saw it will forget his production of *Les Merveilleuses*, at Daly's ?) ; and the activities on a different plane of Mr. Shaw and Mr. Granville Barker, the Stage Society, etc. Of the social gaieties of the period, culminating in the Bacchanalian crescendo which ended in July, 1914, it is scarcely necessary to speak. A generation hence, volumes of memoirs will pour from the press making a vain attempt to describe what those who

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never witnessed it will never be able to believe. Those radiant nights of danceng in *travesti*, those unceasing libations of dry monopole, that frenzied pursuit of pleasure careless of the morrow, have passed away as even the most brilliant night must yield before the grey and menacing dawn.

For the leisured classes, for people, that is to say, with incomes of about £800 a year and over, we can see now that the period was one of peculiar ease and comfort, eminently conducive to the pursuit of the most diverse, delightful, and completely useless branches of scholarship. Such hoary institutions as the public school, Oxford and Cambridge, the “English gentleman,” and so forth, if they bore in them the seeds of decay or the indications of change, had not yet either decayed visibly, or changed in any manner that attracted notice. For public schoolboys and for undergraduates—

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and James Elroy Flecker was essentially of the *fine fleur* of our public school and University system—it was a time of unusual opportunity for intellectual flower-gathering. It provided a little of everything and nothing long. Perhaps, by giving adolescent boys and girls so many lovely things to think about, it helped to deprive them—in matters of which, after crossing an ocean of blood and tears, we can to-day so depressingly see the importance—of all capacity for thought. The world was so full of a number of things—who can blame them if they were happy ?

And, indeed, for the young things of the privileged classes, it was a happy time. In the world of art and letters the absinthe-sodden gloom of the 'nineties had disappeared, with much of the Victorian puritanism which had provoked it. The sun was shining again, the lark, etc., were functioning to perfection. Who can blame

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those young men and women for not troubling to investigate problems so banal as those of foreign politics ? They had the world full of toys to play with, and for to admire they had “the flowers and men and mountains that decorate it so superbly.”

Looking back, it is delightful to remember that stern moralists of the Kipling type found much to distress them in the pre-war public school. Bullying had to a large extent disappeared from the unofficial curriculum. The “treat-’em-rough” prefect, who was almost a subaltern and had almost a moustache, was beginning to make way for sixth-form boys with a real interest in the classics and some feeling for literature, who were almost undergraduates. It ceased to be altogether shameful to read the English poets in the school library on a Sunday afternoon. A wave of what our reactionaries would call “softness” and

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outside observers might have described as “civilisation” broke over our crusted institutions—those institutions in which normal intelligence has still to make such a desperate struggle for existence. The change in the public schools was reflected at Oxford. Instead of the fierce and violent reactions of the 'nineties, when those who could not bear the public school atmosphere signalised their escape from the prison-house by rushing to extremes of morbid decadence, there was a more widely diffused cultivation of the arts and less persecution of the poseur, with the result that young men became on the whole less closely wedded to their poses. To be a “decadong” was really more of a rag than anything else, and I don't suppose that any of the youths who in slightly intoxicated moments recited the “credo of a despairing decadent” would have gone to the stake for it, though one or two were induced (to their disgust), by

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a gloomy ass who controlled one of the smaller colleges, to take the train to Cambridge.

The 'nineties were cultivated with rapture in the nineteen-hundreds, and the extravagances and eccentricities of the earlier period were reproduced with painstaking zeal; but, as I have suggested, the point of view was changed, the "*ennui*" was factitious. Of plutocratic Oxford in the pre-war period Mr. Compton Maekenzie, in the second volume of "*Sinister Street*" has proved a faithful recorder, endowed with a prodigious memory. Of conventional Oxford—which then as now, comprised such a large proportion of the undergraduates—no recorder is or ever will be necessary. "*The system*" took their money and at the end of three or four years produced them like rabbits from a conjuror's hat and distributed them among curacies and assistant-masterships and lawyers' offices, to continue the work

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of perpetuating “the system.” The proportion of undergraduates, however, whose main interest was in literature, art, and scholarship—the *aesthetes*, in short—deserve some reminiscent pages. Poetry or, to be exact, shockingly bad verse, was written by the ream, and the fashionable thing was to be “wondrous,” more wondrous than anyone had ever been before. One had also to be sensitive and rather frail, to cultivate “ennui,” to be gnawed by secret despairs. How much of a camouflage was this frail and lily-like attitude was once agreeably displayed by a friend of Flecker’s and of my own who, on being debagged at Merton, horrified the aghast rowing men by a boxing display which left quite a number of them prostrate. The outraged poet then resumed his trousers with a dignity which struck awe into all beholders. The despairs were the greatest possible fun. Don’t imagine from the following lines that

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the author of them was not enjoying himself  
hugely.

There is no new hope to be hoped for,  
There is no new word to be said ;  
All ends are as shadows of shadows,  
Pale ghosts of things dead.

The good and the evil, what are they ?  
I am weary of ease as of strife :  
The days as they drag are made heavy  
With loathing of life.

Before composing this work he had, I believe, lunched unwisely. After luncheon, in a mauve silk shirt, he had punted on the Cherwell and sadly and regretfully he had been seasick into it. The tragedies of youth !

Other lines, I think they must be from the same delightful source, have lingered in my memory. I hope their author (if he sees this book) will forgive me for quoting them. After all, the prompting motive is as much sentiment as a sense of humour !

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Here, then, are the opening stanzas of "My Lilies" :

In my soul's garden, 'mid a tangled bed,  
A few poor lilies grew.  
But now, alas ! is their pale glory shed.  
They were but few.

Sadly the white leaves severed one by one  
And fell upon the bed :  
The flowers I had are faded, there are none  
That are not dead.

My poor flowers ! the garden of my soul  
Is empty now and bare ;  
I have no lilies left, I gave them all :  
All that there were.

Besides lilies, we were nearly all of us greatly addicted to "lassitude"; none more so than the friend from whose works I cull these gems. Here is one example of it :

Tired September : and the rain is falling, falling,  
With a sound of utter lassitude, outside :  
Up the garden I can see the gray mists crawling  
Over rose-beds where, alas, the flowers have died.

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And here another :

Despair is on us in these autumn days :  
The year is tired of flowers ; the year is cold—  
I am tired, too, of all these weary ways,  
For the soul in me is very, very old.

I am tired, so tired, of all that I remember,  
So tired of everything that I forget.  
With me, as with the year, it is November—  
O this lassitude, this mist of vague regret !

Oh, this lassitude ! I remember how a genuine relic of the 'nineties (grown in the course of years into a very sensible parish priest) once parodied our silliness, in a happy after-dinner moment. Unfortunately the first verse is the only one which I can recall. It went thus :

From the garden of sorrow  
Wan blossoms I piek.  
My mistresses bore me,  
My meals make me siek !

What Flecker's bad verses were like I do not know, as I did not make his acquaintance until his Oxford days were over. But Mr.

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Frank Savery has recorded that even as a schoolboy he already wrote verses “with appalling facility.” “He imitated with enthusiasm and without discrimination, and, the taste in those long-gone days being for Oscar Wilde’s early verse and Swinburne’s complacent swing, he turned out a good deal of decadent stuff, that was, I am convinced, not much better than the rubbish written by the rest of his generation at Oxford. What interested me in Flecker in those days,” Mr. Savery continues, “was the strange contrast between the man—or rather, the boy—and his work. Cultured Oxford in general, I should add, was not very productive at that time: a sonnet a month was about the maximum output of the lights of Balliol. The general style of literature in favour at the time did not lend itself to a generous outpouring. Hence there was a certain piquancy in the exuberant flow of passionate verse which

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issued from Flecker's ever-ready pen, in spite of his entire innocence of any experience whatever.

“ Furthermore, he was a wit—a great wit I used to think, but no humorist—and, like most wits, he was combative. He talked best when someone baited him. At last it got to be quite the fashion in Oxford to ask Flecker to luncheon- and dinner-parties—simply in order to talk. The sport he afforded was usually excellent. . . . Looking back on it now, I believe I was right in thinking that in those days he had no humour (there is very little humour in Oxford); nor am I so entirely sure that his wit was bad. I had, at any rate, a growing feeling that, in spite of his immaturity and occasional bad taste, he was the most important of any of us: his immense productiveness was, I vaguely but rightly felt, better and more valuable than our finicky and sterile good taste.

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“By 1906 he had developed greatly—largely thanks to the companionship of an Oxford friend whom, in spite of long absence and occasional estrangements, he loved deeply till the end of his life. Even his decadent poems had improved : poor as are most of the poems in ‘The Bridge of Fire,’ they are almost all above the level of Oxford poetry, and there are occasional verses which forecast some of his mature work.”

If, as Mr. Savery tells us, Flecker during his Oxford life poured out an almost ceaseless stream of bad and imitative verse, we can, I think, regard this chiefly as the emotional overflow from his intellectual development. I have dwelt at some length on the sillier aspects of pre-war Oxford, but it would be giving a hopelessly wrong impression to represent such asininities as being all that Oxford meant, to those who indulged in them. All Universities are, I suppose,

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divided into two camps, the first consisting of those who acquire learning for a definite ulterior motive—money, position, and so forth ; the second, those who read for their own delight and intellectual enrichment, those who have the true scholar's instinct, who would not insult any branch of study by taking thought as to its utility or profit. Now, in the pre-war period it was the spirit of this second camp which was in the ascendant at Oxford and was to a most notable degree embodied in James Flecker. It was a time when men read the literature of Greece and Rome, of France and of England, much in the spirit in which Keats read Chapman's *Odyssey*. And they are scarcely to be blamed if they combined with some of the æsthetic ardour of the Renaissance not a little of its joyous obscenity and hearty appetite for life.

Flecker's obscenity amounted to a gift, and many of his most famous witticisms and

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*jeux d'esprit* (written down and illustrated in a MS. volume bound in "art linen," called the "Yellow Book of Japes," the joint production of Flecker and of his greatest Oxford friend) are scarcely likely to find their way into print. One may be forgiven, perhaps, for regretting this, for they were the outcome of enormous high spirits and of a wholly charming gusto for life—a rapturous enjoyment which so many of us can experience in retrospect, so few, like Flecker, at the moment. "Ever is Now," says the philosopher. But only those whom the gods love know his meaning by instinct and without being taught.

## II



## II

FLECKER was a tall, dark man, with a swarthy complexion, blue eyes, thick black eyebrows, full lips. The most noticeable things about him to anyone who met him for the first time were his gentle, rather high-pitched voice, his enthusiasm, and the curious mixture of ironic humour and sadness of which his habitual expression was compounded. In general appearance he was decidedly "foreign-looking," and a strain of Jewish blood was apparent. He himself was always aware that he did not look entirely English, and as he had a passionate love for the country of his birth, nothing annoyed him more than to be mistaken for anything but an Englishman. On one occasion, inquiring of

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a fellow-passenger whether a 'bus went in a certain direction, the individual whom he addressed, mistaking him for a foreigner, insisted on pointing out several landmarks, such as the Law Courts, St. Paul's Cathedral, and so on. Flecker's disgust can be imagined. When the vehicle arrived at the Bank, and he prepared to descend, he growled at his informant, who was obviously about to show him the Royal Exchange, "Damn it all, I may have seen it before!"

He had several moustaches during his early manhood, and shaved them off; but he stuck to a moustache in the end, and it certainly suited him. "You can hear it whistle as it grows," he once pathetically remarked about his beard, while he was shaving.

Flecker was born in Lewisham, on November 5th, 1884. He was christened Herman Elroy—James was a name which he adopted

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at Oxford—and was the eldest of the four children of the Rev. William Herman Flecker, D.D., now the headmaster of Dean Close School, Cheltenham. He was educated at his father's school at Uppingham, and at Trinity College, Oxford. He was at Oxford from 1902 to 1907. During his last year at the University (or just after he went down) he paid his first visit to Italy with the friend to whose influence and inspiration he owed so much. This first Italian visit was a turning-point in his career, and had a marked reaction upon his poetry. Soon after he left Oxford (in 1907) he became for a time a master at the preparatory branch of University College School at Holly Hill, Hampstead, of which the late Mr. Charles Simmons was then principal. Flecker had rooms at the top of Holly Hill, opposite the Mount Vernon Hospital.

He was certainly an original and probably

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an extremely able teacher. The whole subject of education was one of his deepest intellectual interests until the end of his life, and he was an ardent educational reformer, as his dialogue "The Grecians" indicates clearly enough. What his general attitude was towards learning and towards the conventional education of his time may be guessed in part from the following sentences, taken from the preface to his "Scholar's Italian Book" :

"Finally, I express the hope that some headmasters may find in this book a useful recreation for a sixth form exhausted by successful labours in scholarship-hunting ; and that many scholars may be induced by me to spend a holiday fortnight studying a language which all those who know love. . . . No attempt has been made in the ensuing pages to produce a work of commercial or military value. . . . My sole object has been to enable any intelligent student who

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knows some Latin and French to learn with the minimum of labour to read a great literature.”

Although Flecker was only at Holly Hill for one term, he made a great and lasting impression on some of his pupils. Many of his translations from the French, which were subsequently printed, after revision, were first drafted in the schoolroom, and written in chalk on the blackboard after the boys had produced their own attempts, as an illustration of how it could be done. Leconte de Lisle’s “Hjalmar speaks to the Raven” was translated in this way. Flecker threw himself with characteristic gusto into the school-life, and took an active part in the school games, which he played with immense enthusiasm and no skill. He was popular, but he must have startled everyone in the school, from the boys upwards. He certainly once shocked one of the school-mistresses by informing her at luncheon

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that he had been to the Oxford Music Hall the night before !

When he left Hampstead he went for a few months to Mill Hill, but he found its Nonconformist atmosphere antipathetic. After leaving Mill Hill he gave up teaching altogether, and decided to go in for the Consular service, the training for which would enable him to spend two years at Cambridge in the study of Oriental languages.

I think the first set of verses which Flecker ever got into print in a London paper was the poem called "Desire," which appeared in the *Idler* in January, 1907. It is signed "H. E. Flecker," and is worth quoting, because, though immature and, indeed, of no great value, it is nevertheless characteristic and bears the impress of the writer's personality.

Launch the galley, sailors bold !  
Prowed with silver, sharp and cold,  
Winged with silk, and oared with gold.

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Silver stream in violet night ;  
Silken clouds in soft moonlight ;  
Golden stars in shadowy height.

Stars and stream are under cloud ;  
Sinks the galley, silver-prowed,  
Silken sails are like a shroud.

Flecker's fondness for the precious metals is traceable through all his work. In this short poem it will be noticed that "silver" appears three times and "golden" once.

He probably had several little poems in the *Idler*, and other early work was printed in a motor journal of which a friend of his was editor. But he was a sufficiently good self-critic, even at this period, not to reprint all these ephemeral pieces in "The Bridge of Fire," which Mr. Elkin Mathews published for him in the Vigo Cabinet Series in 1907. "The Bridge of Fire" was originally to have been illustrated, by Mr. Trellawney Dayrell-Reed, who made a set of Beardsleyesque drawings, in one of which

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the poet was caricatured, in much the same way that Beardsley caricatured Wilde in one of the "Salome" illustrations. I do not know why the project was abandoned. Expense, most likely.

The friend to whom I am indebted for information about Flecker's schoolmastering experiences at Holly Hill has given me the following notes about Flecker's London life at this period.

"He had a great liking for Hampton Court, and was never weary of wandering through the picture gallery or around the beautiful gardens. He was one of the very few Englishmen I have ever met who went *often* to the British Museum, Tate and National Galleries. When he was in London he would frequently arrange to meet people opposite such-and-such a picture in the National Gallery, regardless of the fact that it generally took his friend ten minutes to find out where it was situated. He was fond

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of going to the Café Royal—he called it the only really Parisian café in London—and when there he used to draw (very badly) monkeys on the table. He was fond also of the Vienna Café in Holborn, where he liked studying the types. . . . Flecker possessed a cynical sort of wit, and was occasionally a practical joker."

In October, 1908, Flecker went to Cambridge, and entered at Caius College—not altogether a happy choice. His rooms were in Jesus Lane, near the Sidney Street end. One of his intimate friends at this period has sent me the following account of Flecker's life at Cambridge :

" My most vivid recollections are largely jokes, limericks, rhymes, and fantastic social schemes which were never meant to pass beyond word of mouth, and which I have no intention of helping into print, delightful as they were: he had a genius for such things. There are a few I might mention.

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Government under an obligation (the revolt was then already near collapse). His companion was J. J. Knox, who afterwards went (I think) to Teheran. But very likely you have had this story already from someone else.

“Flecker told it very vividly—they were sitting in a café when a mob rushed up, crying, ‘À la lanterne !’ No one could believe they were both English, because of the excellence of Knox’s accent. ‘On peut passer vingt ans à Paris—on ne perd jamais l’accent anglais.’

“Flecker was much amused at what he regarded as a certain childishness and affected *naïveté* in Cambridge men, particularly King’s men. He typified this by an imaginary King’s man’s dream: ‘Do you know I had such a wonderful dream last night. I dreamt that I was walking in a beautiful garden, all by myself !’

“He always had a great desire to herd



“TWO ENGLISHMEN (FLECKER AND J. D. BEAZLEY) ENJOYING  
THEMSELVES IN GERMANY.”

*Facing page 36.*



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his friends round him, to establish a sort of society of them—calling them all ‘ Brother —,’ and so on. I think the people who impressed him most at Cambridge were A. W. Verrall and Prof. E. G. Browne : none of his contemporaries at Cambridge had an influence on him in any way comparable to that of J. D. Beazley at Oxford.

“ He was very enthusiastic about Apuleius, and once started an admirable translation of the *Golden Ass*. He read me part of the XIth Book, but he never finished it : I’m afraid my criticism of detailed points discouraged him, which was the last thing I meant.

“ Of particular visual recollections of him, one of the vividest is on a river picnic above Byron’s Pool, when we all bathed, and Flecker marched about up to his waist in the river, holding a canoe upside down over his head, entirely hiding it. He was an expert both at punting and canoeing, and

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had a justifiable contempt for Cambridge standards in these arts.

“He translated Arabic stories delightfully: I recollect very clearly hearing him read the story on which he based the Ballad of Iskander. His version was entrancing, and I thought he spoiled it in the poem by the metaphysical colouring he there gave it.

“I remember how furious he was at being called, in some review of ‘The Last Generation,’ a grim disciple of H. G. Wells at his grimmest. . . . He was at Caius, but I don’t think he had many friends there or took much part in the life of the College. His friends were chiefly, I think, King’s and Trinity men. . . .”

That Caius was not altogether a happy choice for a man of Flecker’s temperament is confirmed by another Cambridge contemporary, from whose letter (to a third party) I am permitted to quote some passages: “I remember, of course, that lunch

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in Rupert's (Rupert Brooke's) rooms in May, 1908, when you and Flecker also were there. . . . Flecker, I remember, was not very happy here. The men of Caius were not sympathetic to him. Almost any other college would have been more congenial, and either King's or Trinity obviously the best. The Caius people tried to be kind to him, but I don't think he found much enjoyment in breakfast at 8 a.m. with Rugby blues and students of law and medicine. He saw a good deal of Rupert and of other members of the Carbonari circle in King's. Arthur Schloss, now Waley, was, I think, his greatest friend in King's. They were both lovers of the East. I think he joined the Fabian Society of those days, as nearly everyone did who was in or on the fringes of these King's circles. But he wasn't much interested in politics. He was inclined to dislike the poor and to be bored with them and to regard the large

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projects of our young hopes as waste of time.”

At Oxford Flecker had been the (then) conventional high Tory in politics. He liked the idea of Emperors and Kings, and of magnificent courts, because he associated them with a lavish patronage of the arts. His view was that the best art was produced under an autocracy, e.g. Velasquez and the Russian Ballet under the late Czar—and that nothing else much mattered. The plebs, he felt, in their own best interests, should be governed firmly, from above. By the time he reached Cambridge, however, his ideas on political matters were rather more “serious.” Cambridge made him a Liberal, even an enthusiastic Liberal. At one time he seems to have played with the project of throwing up his career in the Consular service and standing for Parliament. For several reasons, I venture to disagree with the statement of the Cam-40

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bridge contemporary whose letter I have just quoted, that Flecker wasn't much interested in politics. No doubt the minutiae of party politics bored him, and the arid intellectual wrangles of the Fabians. But he was certainly interested in the general progress of political thought, in revolutions, in the politics of the human race. He had an ardent sympathy with the political idealism of Shelley and of Keats, and deplored—from his standpoint as poet—the apparent absence of any movement capable at once of absorbing and inspiring him. In a review of the sixth volume of Professor W. J. Courthope's "History of English Poetry" he writes: "Yet we often agree with Mr. Courthope when he is not employed in criticism, and especially when he deplores the absence of political interest in modern poetry. He is rather apt to blame the poets: he should blame history. The dearth of proud and eagle-winged forces in this

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modern age is a calamity for art. Whether these century-old poets preached an idea as Shelley, Byron, and Wordsworth, ran counter to it, as Crabbe, or neglected it, as Keats, they had the inestimable advantage of living in a society rent by the enthusiasm and hatreds of the French Revolution. In those good days Shelley was not an ineffectual angel whose pretty lyrics might be read by simpering girls, but a most effectual Devil, like a socialist of to-day, attacking the very foundations of society. Only during the last year has there arisen in England a political crisis worthy of the pen, and in this revived bitterness of strife lies at least some hope for the future of English Poetry.”

In regard to his life at Cambridge, although his attempt to recover the old rapture of University life may not have been entirely successful (any more than an amorous *réchauffage* can be entirely successful), he

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certainly did not regret the years he spent there. He played strenuous tennis ; punted a good deal ; wore his beloved blazers whenever he got a chance ; at times sported a corduroy coat ; talked ; made many friends ; contributed to various Cambridge papers such as *The Cambridge Review* and *The Gownsman*, and—more important to him than anything else—made progress in the art to which his life was devoted. To me he often referred with great satisfaction to the fact that he had had “the peculiarly delightful experience” of life at both Universities.

After leaving Cambridge, Flecker was sent to Constantinople in June, 1910 ; was taken ill there in August of the same year, returned to England in September and went to a sanatorium in the Cotswolds. In March, 1911, he returned to his post, apparently quite recovered, and was transferred to Smyrna in April. In May, 1911, he went on leave to Athens, where he

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married a Greek lady, Miss Hellé Skiadaressi, whom he had met the year before. He spent three months' holiday mostly in Corfu (where the poem called "Phæacia" was written), and was sent to Beirut, Syria, in September, 1911. Flecker did not really like the East, or the Easterns, when he got to know them well, although he had an instinctive understanding of them. His first impressions of Constantinople were, however, happy enough. Writing to a friend about it, he says : "It is very beautiful, and, as I tell everybody, not a bit like our Earl's Court Exhibition, as I feared it might be. I am going to stay here for two months more, at least, so I hope I shall enjoy myself : indeed, I do. I ride a horse and take photographs and swim in the Bosphorus and play tennis and talk to Turks in the loveliest country in the world. But I am lonely at times. . . ." He undoubtedly missed his wide cirele of friends in London and at the Universities.

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At Beirut he seems to have been particularly homesick, and he admitted afterwards that he spent most of his time there dreaming of Oxford. But it was not so bad to start with. "Not a bad life here," he says in one of his letters, "riding, bathing (bathed Nov. 22, sea quite warm), decent rooms, piano . . . people mostly fools."

In December, 1912, he came back on leave for a few weeks to England, and visited Paris, returning to Beirut in January, 1913. In March, 1913, he was again taken ill, and after a few weeks on the Lebanon (Brumána) he went to Switzerland, where he remained for the last eighteen months of his life. He went first to Leysin, but moved on to Montreux, then to Montana, to Locarno, and finally, in May, 1914, to Davos. He died at Davos on January 3rd, 1915, and was buried at Cheltenham at the foot of the Cotswold Hills.



### III



### III

MY personal memories of James Flecker start from an evening in the summer of 1907, when, in response to an invitation, I called upon him after dinner at his lodgings in a Bloomsbury Square. The details of that evening call remain clear and vivid in my mind, but where we first encountered one another and how many times we had previously met I cannot remember. It was, no doubt, Trellawney Dayrell-Reed, a friend whom we had in common, who introduced us; and I have a vague recollection of a crowded tea-party in a flat in Chelsea (given by the mother of the lady who later on was so often to be our hostess) at which Flecker must have been present. But, in any case,

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we could only have known one another very slightly on the evening when I walked over from my Bloomsbury lodgings to his. I remember very well telling myself, as I crossed Russell Square, not to be impressed by the Flecker “legend.” Already, after a few months of journalism in London, I had begun to be rather contemptuous both of Oxford wit and Oxford reputations.

Flecker was the great man among my circle of friends in those days, and his name—and jokes—were upon everybody’s lips. I had got rather sick of hearing it.

The house in which he was staying was the usual slightly dingy Bloomsbury boarding-house, differing hardly at all from the one which I was temporarily inhabiting myself. I well remember its gloomy hall, lit by a meagre speck of gas, the landlady’s folded arms and suspicious eye, the dark stairs leading up to the “second-floor back,” and the bright line of light gleaming under

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Flecker's door. When I opened the door, I found the poet striding about under the baleful glare of unshaded incandescent gas, amid an indescribable confusion of books and pictures and belongings. He was "packing up," he said, in preparation for a journey to France with a friend of his called Knox. They were going to investigate the rising among the *vignerons* of the Bordeaux district, where Catholicism was in conflict with the Republic—a romantic adventure, with revolvers in it! Flecker had bought his, and its barrel glittered in the gaslight as he showed it to me.

If he really was "packing up," there was certainly nothing to indicate that the enterprise had got very far. The tables and all the chairs were piled with books—beautifully bound classical texts, French and Italian novels in paper covers, copies of "L'Assiette au Beurre" and of "Jugend," dictionaries, volumes of the poets—and,

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half-buried among the piles, were such things as a typewriter, a bottle of Maraschino and another of Chianti, tumblers, pictures, manuscripts. Pictures were piled up against the skirting-boards, or lay on their faces on the floor in imminent danger of being crushed under their owner's feet as he paced up and down the room.

My disinclination to be impressed vanished in a very few minutes. I was immensely impressed. Flecker was precisely what I thought a poet ought to be. We were most of us sentimental francophiles in those far-off days, and I was full of yearnings and illusions about the Latin Quarter and Montmartre and the Moulin de la Galette and the Bal Bullier and the Bal des Quatz' Arts, and so on—knowing nothing at all about them at first-hand. But Flecker had already tasted and explored these long-dreamed-of delights, and his accounts of his visits to Paris thrilled me with excitement. He

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talked of Paul Marinier and Lucien Boyer, of Steinlen and Aristide Bruant, of the "Chat Noir" (ye gods !) and of the Noctambules, of the Café d'Harcourt and the Boul' Mich', of poets and painters and their mistresses. He was an admirable talker, even before an audience of one speechless and ecstatic acquaintance, and he had a pleasant knack of giving a vivid and amusing description of incidents and events in which he had played a part. He had a gentle, high-pitched, enthusiastic voice, singularly attractive to listen to. He turned life always and all the time into a tremendous adventure. Like most creative artists, he was egoistic, and used to talk in a strain which would have seemed like megalomania if it had not been lightened by wit. On this occasion he read me two "magnificent" poems which he had recently finished—"Ideal" and "The Town without a Market." I shall never forget the gusto

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with which he read the line (from “Ideal”), “Friend, we will go to hell with thee.” “Hell,” I remember thinking slyly, was just the sort of big, vague, decisive spot to which anyone of Flecker’s enthusiastic nature *would* think of accompanying a friend. But his enthusiasm, if it carried him at times off his feet, carried him also—throughout his life and throughout his work—away from all meanness.

Said I: “The world was made for kings :  
To him who works and working sings  
Come joy and majesty and power  
And steadfast love with royal wings.”

The poet and the painter were to him the real “kings” of this world—this world given them to enjoy to the utmost as a reward for their work.

The first two chapters of one of the many versions of Flecker’s novel, “The King of Alsander,” fell off the table during the evening, and at my request he read them to me. I was sufficiently under the spell of his

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personality to think them marvellous. (Alas, when nearly seven years later the completed manuscript came to me in my capacity as adviser to Flecker's publishers, it was a bitter disappointment to find how time had robbed the poor old "King" of nearly all his glamour !)

When the chapters of the "King of Al-sander" had been read and discussed, our talk reverted to poetry and to Flecker's own poems. His arrangements regarding "The Bridge of Fire" had just been concluded with Mr. Elkin Mathews, and he was looking forward with tremendous excitement to its appearance. He read me a few more of the poems which the book was to contain, including "Rioupéroux"—a poem for which I have retained a particular affection ever since.

As I walked home that night, filled with excitement and warmed, no doubt, with Chianti and Maraschino, I felt that to be

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a poet was the most wonderful, the most romantic adventure in a world full of the maddest and most delicious possibilities. I had never before encountered anybody with anything like Flecker's rapturous joy of living. Most of us, at that time, cultivated a mask of artificial gloom ("There is no new hope to be hoped for, there is no new word to be said !") which ineffectively concealed our high spirits. Flecker, I think, to some extent reversed this process. His eyes were always sad eyes, and there was a certain sadness latent in his smile which added much to its charm. It has been asserted, particularly by critics who never knew him, that the occasional undernote of melancholy in some of his poems was purely factitious. This, to my mind, is a very superficial view, based not only on ignorance of Flecker but on ignorance of the human heart as well. To me it seems impossible not to connect Flecker's extra-

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ordinary *joie de vivre*, his capacity for living each moment to the full and the rapture with which he looked upon the visible world, with a belief that he had an early premonition that his allotted span was too short to allow him a moment to waste. When he described himself as “the lean and swarthy poet of despair,” it was probably a joke, but like all jokes worth making there was a substratum of truth in it. Throughout his work is to be traced that natural horror at the idea of death which a man of his temperament may well be excused for admitting. It would be absurd to dismiss such a poem as “No Coward’s Song,” or the poem called “Prayer” (which was written, I believe, as early as 1907), as being insincere or artificial. Indeed, the opposite is probably the truth—that they come straight from the poet’s heart and are among the most intimate and subjective utterances which he ever entrusted to print.

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After the evening I have described, Flecker and I met very frequently in a queer flat in Brixton, the home of a lady of many accomplishments, not the least of which was a capacity for appreciating young poets and their verses. The atmosphere of the flat was ultra-Parisian. French novels (not always of a very prudish kind) and volumes of French verse lay about everywhere, and the walls of the sitting-room were decorated with Steinlens, principally Steinlen cats. Here we used to gather and read one another's verses and sing the songs from Paris *cabarets* of which Flecker and our hostess between them seemed to have an almost inexhaustible répertoire. Paul Marinier's long-forgotten "Ninon" was a great favourite. I fancy the chorus went like this :

Allons, Ninon ! Ninon, ne dis pas non !  
L'Amour est bon, c'est un péché mignon.  
Pour y goutter deseends vite en cachette,  
Ninon, Ninette !

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Flecker was very fond of "Navaho" and "La Branche de Lilas," and I can see him now, sitting at the piano, dressed in a scanty Japanese kimono, smiling his pleasant, sardonic smile, and picking out the tunes, while the rest of us shouted the choruses.

Both Flecker and his friend, J. D. Beazley, had a habit of writing out their poems very neatly in tiny little manuscript books and presenting them to the lady of the flat. Several such volumes were in circulation among our group and are still, I hope, in existence, though it is hardly likely that in Flecker's case there is much unpublished work of any real value which has yet to find its way into print.

At these far-off parties, "literary" as, indeed, they were, I do not remember that there was much flow of conversation as (for example) the Dublin intellectuals understand the word, or as the modern under-

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graduate understands it. The hours were devoted to singing and to laughter; the problems of the world were let go hang; taste, Shakespeare and the musical glasses were neglected utterly. Flecker nearly always kept the room in a roar when he was present, by his constant flow of wit and his almost unvarying high spirits. I remember, however, one amusing occasion on which the tables were turned against him and his repartee extinguished. I had taken to dinner at the Brixton flat a friend of mine who was anxious to meet Flecker, but who had a rooted objection to "Bohemia." Our hostess—it was in the days when Society was beginning to be badly bitten with stage-mania—had recently been touring the suburban music-halls in a sketch written by one of her friends, and in the course of her wanderings had made the acquaintance of a little Cockney dancer named Gertie. It was Gertie whom, out of

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sheer naughtiness, she invited to make the fourth at this particular dinner. From the beginning nothing went well for Flecker. Whenever he caught the ball of conversation Gertie snatched it ruthlessly. She was exceedingly plain, the blameless wife of a Brixton dentist, and by no means in her first youth. But in her own strange world—that of the smaller music-halls—Gertie was as outstanding a character as Flecker was in his. Her humour was the humour of the New Cut, her back-chat surpassed a South London 'bus conductor at his best. Never before have I listened to such a torrent of "lip" as this true descendant of Mrs. Peachum and of Diana Trapes poured out on the poet's (for once) defenceless head. Whenever poor Flecker got in a rapier-thrust, he was promptly bludgeoned by devastating references to "Jerusalem" and wholly libellous innuendoes connecting his swarthiness with a neglect of baths!

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I think this was the only occasion on which I ever knew him to be verbally at a disadvantage.

The incident which really formed the beginning of my more intimate acquaintance with Flecker was connected with his first volume of poems, "The Bridge of Fire." We were all of us in a great state of excitement about the book before its appearance, and I had arranged with the editor to review it in *The Academy*. When I received my copy I found that, alas ! it did not come up to my exaggerated expectations, and in my disappointment I proceeded to administer a perfectly sincere if rather jejune "slating." My notice, when it came out, caused surprise and wrath among our little circle. All my friends were, indeed, extremely angry with me—except Flecker. I think Flecker must have been amused and interested to hear one note of honest criticism, however amateurish, amid a chorus of

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rather fatuous praise. In any case he contented himself with sending a rejoinder to *The Academy*, which was published the week after my notice—a rejoinder which showed great skill and the most exemplary good manners. And when, a year or two later, I gathered up my own stray verses from the periodicals which had printed them and issued my first book, he took the trouble to review it in a Cambridge paper in characteristically generous terms.

Our connection of author and publisher, which was to last until his death, began when, in 1910, I started a monthly magazine of earnest literary aspirations. In the first number of this periodical, J. D. Beazley, of Christchurch, Flecker's most intimate Oxford friend, had let me print a poem of his called "The Visit," which Trelawney Dayrell-Reed illustrated. And Flecker himself became a fairly frequent contributor. The poems called "In Memoriam," "Pillage," and

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“The War Song of the Saracens,” first appeared in its pages.

It was some time in 1910 that I got the firm which owned the magazine to issue a new volume of Flecker’s verses, to which he gave the title “Thirty-Six Poems.” But the concern having, unfortunately, more good intent than capital or business management, the volume did not prosper, and on the death of my magazine after a year’s struggle for existence, the sheets of the book were transferred to Messrs. J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd. Messrs. Dent reissued the book in 1911, with six additional pieces, under the more familiar title, “Forty-Two Poems.”

During Flecker’s Cambridge years I only met him occasionally during vacation, and my memory in regard to details is less trustworthy than for the earlier period. But I recall an extraordinary luncheon at the *Petit Riche* restaurant, just after his

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return from a summer holiday, I think in Wales. (I have a vague notion that he had been staying at a "Fabian Summer School.") I had been invited to meet a friend of his, a friend who "lived in South Kensington." Awe-inspiring details were whispered to me regarding the friend's home, and Flecker had clothed himself in perilous splendour for the call which he proposed to make there during the afternoon. I tell myself my memory must be playing me tricks when I think of his get-up! It could *not* have been a bowler hat, a dark grey frock-coat with watered silk facings, trousers to match, a skimpy green-knitted tie, and yellow boots! But if it wasn't just that, it was a mixture of garments which gave the same impression. I don't think he found the South Kensington atmosphere very congenial; and I never saw him arrayed so wonderfully again. Very shortly after this he left England for the East. I fancy that

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the last time I saw him in the flesh was at a luncheon at Béguinot's in Old Compton Street, when J. J. Knox was present. On that occasion I heard once again the story of their adventures during the Wine riots, a story which has been retold in an earlier chapter.

When I look back on James Flecker and remember what he meant to his wide circle of friends, it is to feel much more than a sense of personal loss. It is to feel that something has gone out of life which the new generation does not know, perhaps cannot be expected to know, in view of the grisly shadow under which it has grown up: something rare and irrecoverable—a radiance, a generosity of heart and mind, a natural (not stimulated) ecstasy which the robust commercialism of the present day neither produces nor encourages. Flecker's attitude towards life was what that of the aristocrat is supposed to be, but usually is



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not. He had caught some of the spirit of the Italian renaissance ; and, in compensation for the shortness of his days, he was given the capacity to live them with the intensity of one of those figures whom Cellini has described for us, and to appreciate the earth's loveliness in a way which has been given to few men since that fierce sweet renewal of springtime in the Western world. He was, as far as I know, completely without ulterior motive or base ambitions. He never could have played the now too familiar game of literary and social intrigue by which verse-writers of only moderate talent inflate themselves into great figures. His conception of what is required of those who practise the art of poetry would have made any such proceeding simply unthinkable—a game for bagmen, not for kings. Even in his critical appreciations and denunciations, which I think often erred on the side of over-enthusiasm and were occa-

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sionally at fault, he was at all events never cheap. Nothing, in this connection, showed him in a more favourable light than his rage when some of the English *vers librists* and their associates were leading a hue-and-cry against the Victorians, damning Tennyson and Browning right and left in a noisy effort to call attention to their own not very successful experiments. Flecker's sense of the continuity of the English poetic tradition made this kind of vulgarity unbearable; a wanton breaking of the fourth commandment!

I have put down these odds and ends of recollections for whatever they may be worth, in the hope that by so doing I may encourage others who knew him better to search their memories before it is too late. For, if Flecker was not a "great genius," he was a man of great intellectual integrity and courage, a superb craftsman with a real devotion to his art. His work has certainly

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the qualities of permanence, and the interest which future generations are likely to take in his personality and in the details of his short life is very likely unrealised at present by many who were his contemporaries.



## IV



## IV

AFTER Fleeker's departure for the East I heard very little news of him until the beginning of 1913, when I became associated with the new publishing firm of Max Goschen. (Owing to the regretted death of its proprietor, who was killed in the early days of the war, this firm no longer exists and its copyrights have been distributed among other publishers.) Whether we corresponded at all during the interval, I cannot remember. I suppose we must have done, since I knew his address. But, unfortunately, I have not kept any of the early letters. The first letter from Flecker on which I have been able to lay my hands is dated January 22 [1913].

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It is addressed from the British Consulate-General, Beyrouth, Syria, and was written, apparently, in answer to my request to be allowed to use some of his work in an anthology of modern verse which I was intending, at that time, to compile. The letter runs as follows :

“ MY DEAR GOLDRING,

I was in London a few days in December—and asked after you—but no one seemed to know where you were. I tried hard to get a job in town but couldn’t. I never get paid a penny for anything and my book has not yet sold 200 copies. I am trying to place a play. I am in utter despair and suppose I shall have to live in this bloody country all my life.

Of course take anything you like. I hate all modern poetry and think it perfect . . . —except Yeats and Kipling : these Masefields—though he was a great man once—

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Gibsons, Pounds, Abercrombies, and people  
make me fume with rage.

Q.'s Victorian Verse has got my

Saracens,

Rioupéroux,

and my friend Marsh has got

The Queen's Song,

Joseph and Mary.

Don't take any of the above but anything else you like.

I have much to thank you for, my dear Goldring. I am fairly well known now—that is to say, about as known as Ezra Pound or T. Sturge Moore—but for £500 a year and a berth in England I'd turn Wesleyan.

Yours bitterly,

JAMES ELROY FLECKER.”

I dropped the idea of making an anthology as soon as I discovered what a job

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of work it was going to be, and, instead, determined to try to get for my firm a volume of Flecker's poetry. By this time my belief in him was unshakable and I knew that sooner or later he was bound to come into his own. I wrote offering to take the financial risk of a new book by him (he had previously been forced to publish on commission, except in the case of "Thirty-Six Poems"), and to pay a small advance, £10, on account of royalties.

Flecker's reply was dated March 6th and runs as follows :

"Just a line on some filthy imported notepaper to thank you very much indeed for your kindness in getting me the offer of £10.

I think there is enough for a volume—but I had some idea of adding a preface—would, in fact, if needed.

I don't want the issue of my poems to

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clash with the publication of my novel—there ought to be a month's interval. I suggest that you get Messrs. Goschen to ask — when he is going to publish the novel, and act according. I have only just sent the MS. I have no proofs and shan't get 'em for some time.

All my press notices should be either with you or with Dent. There have been some good ones (*Daily News*, *Athenæum*) of the 42. . . .

Could you tell me the name of a press agent less indecently slipshod than Messrs. — — ?

The press notices on the cap of the 42 were rottenly chosen. I bar the idea, however, of printing them inside the book unless it's done in very small print and on different paper. Even then it's pretty horrid. The most eulogistic of the dogs write such terrible — —, alas.

I read through your poems. Honestly, I

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like them extremely. I confess they seem to me to have a charming atmosphere of taking seriously a fashion of thought that is just out of date—but that is a very great charm—and I think of Pater's essay on Lamb. It seems to me you aim at something simple and graceful and attain it, while other rotters with their *Exultations* and *Sicilian Idylls* aim very high and write God-forsaken formless muck.

With many thanks for getting me a good offer and for sending me your volume,

Ever yours,

J. E. FLECKER.

Your little poems of London streets make me feel rottenly sentimental, imprisoned perhaps for life in this godless sunshiny palm-tree hole without an intelligent soul to speak to.”

I was delighted when Flecker fell in with our suggestion : still more so when the MS.

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of "The Golden Journey to Samarkand" eventually reached the office. I wrote to promise that I would do anything I possibly could to get the book adequately noticed and to push the sales. And at the same time I urged him to write the now famous Preface, and if possible to make it controversial, in order to stir the reviewers into animation. The task of writing the Preface and of correcting the proofs—he almost rewrote the book in proof, and substituted several new poems for those which he thought not up to the standard of the rest of the volume—must have exhausted him, for he was already seriously ill. The following letter, written in pencil on May 10th, 1913, reveals his nervous and overwrought condition :

"Really, your people ought to take the trouble to understand how long it takes a letter to get to Syria. I wrote that dam

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Preface and sent it within about a week of getting the letter. *I am now waiting for proofs of the Preface and the extra poems*, which must be published at all costs, and *I must* see the proofs because they're most terribly hashed. The other proofs are corrected. I have sent off everything.

I am very ill again and probably shall come to England. Can't work at much and hardly at this letter. The Preface was an awful strain. If the printers make a fuss I will pay for the rather heavy alterations. *I must* have the book just as good as it can be. I am anxiously awaiting proofs of the preface and remaining poems."

Flecker did not, of course, return to England (which he was never to see again); but on his doctor's advice went instead to Switzerland. His next letter, dated June 5th, came from Leysin-sur-Aigle :

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“ Thank the Lord this place is curing me. The journey nearly killed me. There is nothing terribly wrong—but I shall take a month or two to recover, and always have to live with precaution. Meantime many thanks for your kind letter. Herewith I have sent the proofs complete. Please look over the revise—or ‘ Taoping,’ in its new version, will come out in a hash.

Left out first page of Preface as being rather babyish. You might let me know what you think of the book—and especially of my alterations to ‘ Gates of Damascus ’ and ‘ Taoping.’ I am immensely proud of it. I’ve turfed out all the rot. It seems to me—and to the few critics who have seen it—to be miles ahead of the ‘ Forty-two.’ If the publisher wants to puff me he can safely say that the Oriental Poems are unique in English.

I do wish one could have a few *de luxe*

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copies (as they do in France), on fine paper with fine binding.

I have, alas ! lost a good deal more than £10 in not having time to get all the poems into mags. In particular 'Oak and Olive' was being kept by the *Fortnightly*, and they sent it back because they had no time to publish it by June. But never mind, let's out with the book at once !

I have some glorious translations from Paul Fort and other modern Frenchmen, but I preferred to keep 'The Golden Journey' original from beginning to end. . . ."

I heard from him again a week later, still from Leysin—a long and very lucid business letter, chiefly about "The King of Alsander," and the behaviour of another publisher who, after accepting the book and getting Flecker to alter it two or three times, eventually declined to bring it out, on the

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ground that he had “lost interest.” (It is only fair to the publisher in question to assume that there were two sides to the dispute.)

“ HOTEL BELVÉDÈRE,  
LEYSIN, SWITZERLAND.

*June 11th [1913].*

MY DEAR GOLDRING,

(1) Many thanks for your letter. I am most frightfully glad about the Edition de luxe: I suppose I shall be allowed one or two copies for myself. But what about sending round notices of it?

As for the Printer’s note, I’ll pay anything in reason—but I don’t consider myself liable for additions or omissions of complete poems. Against the omissions can be put my writing the Preface specially to please the publishers. I am liable to pay for

Alteration to ‘Gates of Damascus,’

One verse altered in ‘Hyali,’

$\frac{1}{2}$  do. do. ‘Oak and Olive,’

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About six lines altered at beginning of  
Preface,

Alteration of Taoping,

as far as they are above 10 per cent, etc.,  
as per contract. The apparently extensive  
minor alterations in the first few pages of the  
proofs are due to the gross carelessness of the  
printers. The last few pages were 20 times  
better done—except that the fellow, appar-  
ently by way of a dirty joke, put tips  
instead of lips in no less than four separate  
places—obviously on purpose. I don't think  
the joke was very funny.

The advertisement is excellent.

(2) I have long had a scheme for bringing  
out an anthology of French verse. Poets of  
To-day and Yesterday—from *after* Hugo  
and Musset and not including them, to the  
present day. Each poet would be preceded  
by a short notice.

In the idea of the short notice and in the  
period traversed the book would thus re-  
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semble Walch's great three-volume work—but in no other way.

(1) There would be a large and very different choice of the more important people and none of the pages of dreary rot by the great unknown.

(2) The criticism at the beginning would be original and not borrowed.

(3) The whole book would not be more than one volume.

It would mean a lot of toil, but very pleasant toil, doing this book—but what I want to know is—would it *pay*? I think if a sale in France could be arranged for it might. But the sale in France would have to be arranged through the *Mercure de France*, so as to facilitate matters of copyright for the more modern fellows. I should want three or four pounds for buying books to cut up, typing, copying, and other exes.

(3) I told you —— was going to publish a novel. He made me revise it twice, the

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last time in December. I half-killed myself getting it finished this January—and sent it off. No answer for three months, and then the inconceivable person returns the novel and says he doesn't feel like publishing it after all this time, as he has lost interest in it. And he is *under contract* to publish it. He now will not answer my letter. Give me some advice. I've got my contract somewhere—at Cheltenham I think, but my papers are disturbed. I must obviously take legal action and claim about £200 damages. I had put in altogether 4 mortal months' work on the novel. . . .

The novel, originally a very poor production, is now a very jolly and fantastic work. Whether it will sell or not I don't believe a publisher in the world could say. It may take or it mayn't. I'll send it you if you like. But—

- (a) Messrs. Goschen may well fight shy of a book which another publisher has

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broken his contract to evade publishing.

(b) It might be better to get compensation before I get another publisher. Yet it might again be better the other way.

If you care to go round to — and see what he means and tell him I'm going to claim a round £200 from him at once, I should be only too glad, but I really, I confess, see not the slightest reason why I should presume even to ask you to do anything so boring. But I think with your literary experience you might be kind enough to give me some advice and perhaps to give me the address of a solicitor who is a friend of literary men.

Ever yours,

JAMES ELROY FLECKER.

You will have the revise back by return when it comes.”

Since Flecker directly asked my advice I had to tell him, out of a wealth of unenviable

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experience, that he did not stand very much chance of receiving any damages, whether by legal or any other kind of action. Eventually he sent the book to Messrs. Goschen.

When the MS. of “*The King of Alsander*” reached me I must confess that my heart sank a little, in spite of all the pleasant memories which the opening chapters revived. I did not think the book had much chance of selling, or, indeed, that it particularly deserved to sell, and I wrote to Flecker explaining my reasons for this opinion.

His reply is dated June 21st (1913) :

“Thanks so much for writing promptly and at such length. The novel is a most patchy affair—I quite agree with you. I am not a novelist because I don’t really think novels worth writing—at the bottom of my heart. Yet I did not burn the old ‘*King of Alsander*’—it is, by God, seven

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years since I lost the first three chapters of it on the way to Paris with . . . and . . . of your acquaintance—because it has, with all its faults, some passages which I think rather jolly, and because even if a bit laboured in parts, it is such a joyously silly performance.

I have written to Goschens accepting their offer.

A drama is a thing, now, that is worth writing. I have had most encouraging letters about my work in that direction from Drinkwater, of the Birmingham Repertory Theatre; but I hope that Granville Barker and no other will take up 'Hassan,' my Oriental play. It may interest you to know that Yasmin is out of my play—was written for it—and also 'The Golden Journey to Samarkand' is nothing but the final scene. I admit a little verse into my play here and there.

Read the poem called 'The Golden

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Journey,' and consider the 'pilgrim with the beautiful voice' to be Hassan, the hero of a whole drama, and think what it would sound like actually on the stage, with Granville Barker scenery—moonlight.

More alive to-day. I hope the novel may succeed after all. It is pleasant of you to be so prompt. The misery of literary people! *The Spectator* and *The Nation* will return or accept pretty quick. The '—' is hopeless, utterly. '—' are, I think, mad. Good God, if one ran the rottenest of little Vice-Consulates in the way the '—' is run, there'd be a row in a month!

Ever yours thankfully,

J. E. FLECKER.

P.S.—(1) Should much like to read your novel; didn't know you'd written one.

(2) What do you think—if by chance 'The Golden Journey' gets known—of  
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having the Oriental poems (plus 'Saraeens' and 'Ballad of Iskander' from 42) illustrated by Syme for a Xmas volume?

(3) Shan't anthologise after what you told me. Thanks."

I had one more letter from him from Leysin (dated June 30, 1913), in which the following interesting passage occurs :

" 'In Phæacia' (the rottenest poem in the book) should appear in *Everyman* and 'Taoping' in *The Spectator* (eh, what? the citadel of respectability stormed!) this week. Did you see Solomon Eagle's extremely amusing jibe at me in *The New Statesman*? Who is he? Am getting fatter and stronger. I hope to be in England producing my play this autumn. Why does no one translate great French books like Jules Renard's 'Lanterne Sourde' or Claude Farrère's marvellous 'Battaille' ? "

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“The Golden Journey to Samarkand” was issued in the early part of July, and was a success almost from the first. Mr. Frank Savery has kindly given me permission to print the following letter analysing the contents of the book, which Flecker addressed to him from Leysin at the time of its appearance :

“ HOTEL BELVÉDÈRE,  
LEYSIN.

(July, 1913.)

*Saturday.*

MY DEAREST FRANKO,

Ever so many thanks for your letter of criticism. Hellé told me particularly to tell you that she agreed with you practically in everything. So do I. I think you underrate 'Santorin'—much admired by Dunsany, by the way. 'Lord Arnaldos' was after all a translation. Otherwise I agree with you, particularly in your damnations. I might explain that the Publishers wrote

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asking if I had anything for them at once and I very hurriedly replied—nothing but a new volume of poetry. I packed off a weird collection of stuff to make up a volume—including a revision of the ‘Bridge of Fire.’ I then sat down to write the book—and it was *after I got the proofs* I managed to hoof out all sorts of godless rot, and replace them by ‘In Hospital,’ ‘Brumana,’ ‘Taoping’; and also just at the last minute I suddenly rewrote ‘The Gates of Damascus’ and enlarged it. There are I reckon still two rotten poems in the book—‘Phæacia’ (an unconscious imitation of Yeats and Jack Beazley) and the ‘Sacred Incident’—both of which I should, however, describe as harmless rather than offensive.

It may amuse you to know a little of the history of these things: you certainly deserve to be told if it amuses you.

*The Preface.* Written when I was pretty ill—like all the later poems—is not quite

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sincere. My chief desire was to say what I thought was wanted to shake up the critics : not to expound the essence of poetry, which would take 500 pages. The beginning is ugly enough with 'theory' repeated so often—but I reread the end with pleasure and thank you for the word 'manly.'

2. The Epilogue is the last scene of 'Hassan'—or rather I wrote 'Hassan' to lead up to the Epilogue. A moonlight scene, a sudden burst into poetry (you know my trick from 'Don Juan'), and the singer with the beautiful voice is the chief character of the play—the famous singer Ishak—*anima naturaliter christiana*. If it doesn't give the public shivers down the back when it is acted in its place, I'll never write again.

3. 'The Gates of Damascus.' I consider this to be my greatest poem—and I am glad you seem to agree. It was inspired by Damascus itself by the way. I loathe the East and the Easterns and spent all my

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time there dreaming of Oxford. Yet it seems—even to hardened Orientalists—that I understand.

4. ‘Yasmin’ is an anthology piece. It is part of ‘Hassan’—written for it and should sound well in its place.

5. ‘Saadabad’ is, with ‘Areiya,’ perhaps the only poem with individual passion I have written. Though verses 1, 3, and 4 of Pt. I are translations from the Turkish, the poem is the most passionately sincere I have ever written. It was written straight out and not a line revised.

6. Of course the ‘Turkish Lady’ won’t wash. The poem is a pretty close translation in the book.

7. ‘Doris,’ dear Frank—it’s very short and I don’t think it’s easy to say how sincere. Mightn’t it come out of the Greek Anthology? I mean by the ship the Ship of Dreams.

8. Glad you like ‘Hyali.’ I never saw

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the island (which exists), but I passed it in the night—and I have seen many isles of the *Æ*gean.

9. Don't you think the *legend* at least of 'Santorin' one of the loveliest in the world? I wonder if you weird Catholics realise that the Middle Age is still in flower in the *Æ*gean. 'That man married a *Syren*,' said a peasant once to my wife—and showed the man!

10. A ship an isle you don't mention. A very subtile poem, Frank, and when you read Henri de Régnier you will find some more.

11. 'Oak and Olive.' A jest after all in the good old manner. No, I wouldn't have it out of the volume, though, of course, it's very slight.

12. 'Brumana.' Horrible misprint—in lines you quoted—*mountain* should be *mountains*.

Poem sincere enough, good God, was thinking of the Bournemouth pines.

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Lavdanon is the Greek name of the Cytisus, a rock rose which makes the woods lovely in Syria. It has a queer little scent.

13. 'Areiya' was, as it says, written in just three minutes and never altered.

14. My wife likes 'Bryan': I hate it—or rather find it cold. But the story (a Greek story again) is jolly enough.

15. Damned clever of me to write a poem as far out of myself as the 'Painter's Mistress.' My wife has not ceased wondering. Suggested by a play of Battaille's and written on the Lebanon.

16. Oh, I did sweat when very ill over 'Taoping,' and turned it from rot into a good poem of workmanship. Suggested by a strange amazing book of one Daguerre called 'Consolata fille du Soleil. . . .'

Concerning the Chinese. Frank, I almost accuse you of insincerity. Do you really shudder at a Japanese print? Do you really believe in the 'inhuman Oriental'

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myth ? Or do you think you *ought* to believe in the myth ?

Don't you think that the healthy honest way for a European to look at a Chinaman or a nigger is to laugh at him ? Don't you think they are there for the joy of the picturesque—as I portray them in 'Taoping' ?

The Turks too. I hate them because I am a modern civilised man. Catholics should and do love them. Why is Turkey rotten ? Why is the Turk an inefficient gentleman ? Islam ? Nonsense : not entirely. Simply because he thinks middle age and is middle age. Saladin and Richard were both very near each other. They talked the same language. They both believed in Aristotle. But Saladin is still Saladin—arguing with a twist—because his 'Aristotle' was translated for him and he never learnt Latin at the Renaissance. Richard is now King George V. . . .

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*Do* read Paul Fort. Perhaps the greatest of all French poets. The humour is wonderful. Have just read 'Mortecrf' and an introduction which quotes the most amazingly jolly things.

'Du temps qu'on allait encore aux baleines, si loin que ça faisait, mat'lot, pleurer nos belles, y avait sur chaque route un Jésus en croix, y avait des marquis couverts de dentelles, y avait la Sainte Vierge et y avait le Roi.'

2. 'Du temps qu'on allait encore aux baleines, si loin que ça faisait, mat'lot, pleurer les belles, y avait des marins qui avaient la foi, et des grands seigneurs qui crachaient sur elle, et y avait la Sainte Vierge, et y avait le Roi.'

3. 'Eh bien, à présent tout le monde est content, c'est pas pour dire, mat'lot, mais on est content! Y a plus de grands seigneurs ni Jésus qui tiennent, y a la Ré-

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publique et y a l'Président, et *y a plus de baleines.*'

That should send you round to the Bookshop.

So sorry you have neuralgia: hope you are better.

'Hassan' nearly ended. You shall see it when complete.

Write again soon as your letters are a great joy.

I don't believe in Barbey's Catholicism a bit. See Jules Lemaître on him.

Thine,

JAMES."

Flecker at about this time moved from Leysin to Montana, and the next letter from him which I preserved came from the latter place and is dated August 31st.

"I have been a most shameful time answering your delightful and enthusiastic

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letter of congratulation, for which I thank you most heartily. The reviews—especially *The Times* and the *Morning Post*—have been good enough for Shakespeare : I do hope they will even be enough to sell a few copies of the book ; I should hate Goschens to be badly had by the transaction.

I have been bothered lately trying to find a new place to live in, and only got here after a frightful lot of bother. I am pretty sick of life. I've finished my play, but I don't suppose it will ever be played.

Would you be so awfully good as to tell me what a poor —— ought to do if he wants to make a little gold by writing (and drawing —my wife can draw) advertisements ? I mean, is it any good just inventing advertisements for Pears' soap and sending it straight to Manager, Pears' Soap, or ought one to work through an advertising agency and, if so, do you know one ? Your experience of these things is so vast. It seems to

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me one might do something paying in that line.

I don't think you answered me about my idea of making a Xmas illustrated book out of my Eastern poems. Trelawney could do it very well.

I shall write a book one day on how to spend money in a jolly way, for men of moderate income (£500–£1500 a year). Tell the —— they ought to travel. The book will sell by the hundred thousand million on the railways' bookstalls.

Do tell me about advertisements.

Ever yours,

JAMES ELROY FLECKER.

Hope you had or are having a sumptuous holiday.”

From this time onwards, inspired perhaps by the splendid reception which nearly all the critics accorded to “The Golden Journey to Samarkand,” he sent me a stream of pro-

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jects for books, none of which he was ever destined to carry out. The only one which he seems seriously to have begun is a translation of “*Virgil, AEncid VI,*” of which in a letter dated “*Sunday,*” he writes as follows :

“ I have to thank you sincerely for the raising of my royalty. Would you let me know about when you expect to publish ‘*The King of Alsander*’ ?

My next book is half written. It is, I’m afraid, rather horrifying. This is the title—

‘ An interpretation  
in Blank verse  
of  
Virgil, *AEncid VI*,  
based on the poetic value of the Sounds,  
together with the Latin text  
and ten prefaces,  
by

James Elroy Flecker,  
120 pp. Wide margins. Paper, 3/6 (?)  
Ready in February.’

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Seriously, this is exactly the title I intend to give the book, with which I am well advanced already. The book is simply an attempt to do a translation of 'Virgil' as satisfactory as Fitzgerald's 'Omar'—a translation which will utterly eclipse the very numerous and very feeble attempts hitherto existing.

The ten prefaces will be as combative as Bernard Shaw's, and occupy some forty pages. They will be on the translation of sounds, on blank verse, on Hell literature, on preceding translations of 'Virgil,' on 'Modern Scholarship,' on the 'Modern Spirit,' etc., and should irritate everyone as effectually as my preface to 'Samarkand.'"

The letter quoted above was sent to the firm, but the envelope contained also a letter addressed to myself, giving more details about his project of translating the 6th *Æneid*.

# JAMES ELROY FLECKER

*“Confidential.*

HOTEL STEPHANI,  
MONTANA-SUR-SIERRE,  
SWITZERLAND.

*Sunday.*

MY DEAR GOLDRING,

This accompanies a somewhat startling announcement to Messrs. Max G. that I want them to publish the 6th *Æneid* of Virgil translated by me into blank verse. Seriously the translation, of which 200 lines out of 900 are ready, will be so striking and the prefaces so combative that I think produced in the way I suggest it may bring in quite good money. Other books of the *Æneid* may follow—but I can't pledge myself.

Suppose 500 are sold at 7/6. Take 75 off for review. Call it £200 for the firm after the Bookseller's profits. Production even in fine style, with advertisements, £60 at

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most. A tenner for the author and £130 for the publisher and there you are.

Many thanks for your letter. I'm glad you like the corrections to the novel. It was very fair-minded of Goschens to give me the increased royalty.

Would you tell me what you think of this : A publisher—friend of mine—writes me (as I told Goschen) will I write a book 'The Future of Poetry' (2/6 book). Offers me £25 down *in advance* of 10% royalty.

Do people ever accept contracts like these, my dear Goldring, unless they're starving ? I would rather like to do the book and I *might* get chapters of it into Reviews. But 3 months' work for £25 ? To a dramatic author whose work Tree is considering with enthusiasm—but there's many a slip, etc.—it don't seem brilliant and I haven't yet closed. Of course its damned unlikely such a book would sell more than 2000 and that I should ever get more royalty. And if it

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sold ten thousand I should net the not enormous sum of £100.

Please keep the above confidential. As I have to rely upon my pen now I shall have to be a bit snarky about contracts. I must have at least the chance of making good money. I think I have enough followers to be able to sell the *Virgil* at a stiff price and with a stiff profit, but I shall want a good fat share in the latter.

If Goschens don't want it I shall try the Riccardi Press and issue it at about eleven guineas !

There is perpetual sunshine here and perpetual leisure. Otherwise there's no particular reason for my continued existence. I get neither better nor worse and wait all day for news of 'Hassan.'

Ever yours—with many thanks for many troubles undertaken on my behalf.

JAMES ELROY FLECKER."

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As the discerning reader will easily gather from this letter, Flecker really had no commercial or money-grubbing instinct whatever. His attempts to be businesslike and “snarky” were a delightful *tour de force*, and they probably did not deceive himself. As everyone who knows anything about the hard facts of book production will be aware, the offer of an advance of £25 for a half-crown volume on a theme unlikely to attract a big public, was far from being ungenerous; while the poet’s estimate of the publisher’s probable profit from the sale of 425 copies of his translation of the VIth *Aeneid* at 7/6 can only be described as a “rich bit of fun.”

In another undated letter, written about this period, from Montana, Flecker describes one more projected book, some notes for which may have been found among his papers.

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“ MY DEAR GOLDRING,

1. Messrs. —— —— have sent me the enclosed. Will you tell me what to reply? As far as I read my contract the Foreign rights are not available. What do they mean though — translation, America, or Tauchnitz? Are they any damned use, anyhow. If the ‘K. of A.’ begins to move, I’d like to get it hitched on to Tauchnitz.

Please return the letter and answer if possible by return.

2. I *have*, it is true, a vague scheme for a book. I have quaint ideas on most things—literature, of course, but also current politics—and a million other things. I find that exile makes it useless trying to work these ideas up into articles, and also that if I do turn them into articles all my dear ideas become heavy and dull. I don’t, for instance, a bit want to write a long review on H. G. Wells. But I do want to

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say and state my opinion for posterity that his latest work is pompous drivel, and that Mr. Polly is one of the best things ever written in any language.

I might call the book ‘Poet’s Porridge,’ and should write it very quickly. Under headings : Literature, Politics, etc., it would consist of little brief paragraphs of rather pithy comment. You may not know that I am a violent phil-Hellene : that will come in also. (I am writing a magnificent coronation ode for King Constantine.)

Just mention the idea to Goschens, will you ? Then if they’d like to see a bit, I’ll scrape together a few pages and send them as a specimen. There is something novel about a poet damning round on current events : only, of course, I ought to be better known than I am to get a hearing.”

Flecker, despite much illness, seems to have been fairly active during his stay in

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Montana. I had another very long and complicated business letter from him, sent from the Hotel Stephani, chiefly about the cost of the corrections to "The King of Alsander." I am very glad to gather from it that the firm let him off lightly and raised his royalties. At the end of this letter he refers to an "excellent and sensible article, by a lady called Hodgson, on 'Samarkand' in December *Gentlewoman* with which I was very pleased."

What I take to be the last communication which I had from Flecker from Montana is undated like the others, but was evidently sent soon after the publication of "The King of Alsander."

"MY DEAR GOLDRING,

The advertisements are excellent. I hope the book will 'move': there is time yet.

I suggest (tho' no one ever yet took

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note of my advertising suggestions) that *The Times*' review, which wasn't a review but a remarkably clever synopsis, should be printed in full on the front page of the cap, if it can be done inexpensively.

You know my play 'Hassan' is going to be played in London this autumn if all goes well: I've got an excellent collaborator. Goschens shall print it--but only after it's played and that's a long way off yet.

Otherwise I try to revise another older play of mine and when not sufficiently inspired for that I do the Virgil, which Gilbert Murray has pronounced to be the best translation of him in English.

I can't work much, and haven't at present any original ideas in my head. I'm only just now managing to get up to lunch after 3 months' illness. Hope to go to Locarno soon--will send you address if I move. As for poems I've only written 4 since 'Samarkand' and they be small ones. Clement

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Shorter offered me three guineas, and I've only been able to send one, whereas he asked for two.

Re 'King of Alsander' Dramatic Rights. I know that signature of J. N. Raphael under many an inadequate verse translation from the French and some fairly adequate Paris gossip. Of course make a bargain for the stage rights. . . . I will write formally on this subject if you like. But I would like to work the play in *collaboration* with J. N. R. if possible—a collaboration in which I should take the minor part.

I owe you many thanks for having introduced me to Goschens. They are certainly advertising excellently. I shall be not only disappointed but astonished if the 'K. of A.' don't move. The *Evening Standard* review and *Globe* are better quoting than *The Times*. The *Westminster* review is a mad muddle—it seems to think I'm a plot. How reviewers love prefaces—it's astonishing.

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If the *Virgil* can't be published by Oxford Press or Riccardi, I may get Goschens to print a few copies, partly at my expense, paper bound and no advertising. Perhaps if I got G. Murray to write a preface they would even be pleased to do it. But I prefer to publish it in the august quietude of Oxford if possible.

That Poetry and Drama *do* irritate me (I don't refer to your excellent review) with its childish anti-God rubbish (we're about 200 years ahead of these asses, on the Continent, in the middle of a Catholic reaction, and we leave that sort of vulgarity to the plebs) and its ridiculous abuse of Tennyson and other Victorians. Do they really imagine — writes as well as Tennyson or Kipling ? It's astonishing. Do write again. Do you ever see D—? If so remember me to her fondly.

Yours,

JAMES ELROY FLECKER."

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Flecker went on to Locarno in the spring of 1914, and I have only been able to discover one postcard sent from there though he must have written several times. The address on the card is "Pension Rheingold, 8 via dei Fiori, Locarno" and the date on the postmark is 18th April, 1914.

"I am asked tentatively what I'll take for the rights of having 'Alsander' *translated into German*. £15 or £20 suggested, of which I suppose Messrs. Goschen take half. Shall I close if offered £15? Don't think I'll get more (Langen's, Munich). Can't it get on to Tauchnitz?

Please send copy of 'Alsander' to — for review, also copies of 'Alsander' and 'Samarkand' to —. He is a worthy fellow who offers to puff me illimitably in America: he offers to pay for the books—but I hope you can send him a free copy as he is full of youthful enthusiasms and

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promises to review the book in some rag or other."

To judge from the following extract from a letter to Mr. Donald Robertson, the change to Locarno made the poet more cheerful even if it did him no good.

"8. IV. 14.

MY DEAR DONALD,

What a pest ! Are you going to make me regret having quitted the fir trees, snows, and thaws of that infernal Montana ?

And exactly 2 days ago, having procured from Gomme an address of yours in S. Remo, I wrote to you there begging you to try and return by the Gothard and see me.

But look here. Make a sporting effort. Come and see me all the same ! It's a long journey because the steamer from Stresa here (you ought to go to Stresa to see the Borromean islands unless you know them :

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otherwise Baveno is a few minutes nearer) is slow (4 hours), but the trip is a very jolly one. . . .”

In May he moved to Davos Platz—for Flecker, as for so many other invalids, the final resting-place before the end. The last three of the letters or postcards which I was able to retrieve from my files were sent from Davos. The first of these, a card, is dated June 1.

“ MY DEAR GOLDRING,

1. Please send a copy of ‘The Golden Journey’ to —— at my expense.
2. Do send me any news there is going.
3. No, my dear fellow, *don’t* ask me if I can write a book about Greece—descriptive tour. I can only preserve the rotten remnants of my life by lying in bed here for years—in the ugliest hole God ever created.
4. But I do intend to publish my great

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ode to Greece separately with a forty-page preface of a most violent kind, full of abuse and invective of pro-Turks, pro-Bulgars, the Liberal Press, with history of the Eastern question. I should much value an assurance that Goschens would take this; it might create a bit of a stir.

5. I'm still waiting to hear from Oxford about my 'Virgil,' and haven't done a line more to it, or, indeed, to anything for months. I need encouragement. Tell Goschens I want to write a play on Judith, and I ought to revise my 'Don Juan,' and I've got to work 'Hassan' with my collaborator. And day after day I do nothing. I *must* try for that photo: *The Sphere* wants one too, and a poem!

Ever yours,

JAMES ELROY FLECKER.

I'd give all my poems to be a healthy navvy."

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The next one probably arrived about a fortnight later.

“ HOTEL BUOL : DAVOS PLATZ,  
SWITZ.

DEAR GOLDRING,

1. I enclose photo. Will send 12 more as soon as ready. Please dispose to most important customers.

2. I enclose biographical details. As I have *no notion* how these should be got up, will you *please* be so kind as to work 'em up for me and have a few copies typed to send to enquirers. One can't do these things oneself : it's so grotesque.

3. Would you let me know if the offer of Goschens' of £10 in advance for the 'Virgil' is definite : as I want to know. The Oxford Press would take it.

4. Please send me any money you can.

5. Please see about an American press agency for me.

## JAMES ELROY FLECKER

I'm so damned ill I'm almost in despair. Sorry I wrote a crusty letter last time. Seems I've lost the Polignac prize, damn it. Murray & Yeats voted for me. Damn everything."

As far as I can recall, all Flecker's projects for books were welcomed by me on behalf of my firm, though not a page of MS. ever reached us of any of them. In regard to the translation of 'Virgil' I felt bound to urge him, in his own interests, to let the Oxford Press issue it, if they would. At this period, although it was within a few months of his death, I had no idea that he was in any imminent danger or that a complete recovery was impossible.

The last letter I can find from him is dated October 12th, 1914.

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“MAISON BARATELLI,  
DAVOS PLATZ.

MY DEAR GOLDRING,

I should much like to hear from you—but perhaps you’re at the war. Wish I were! We’ve got a flat and I amuse myself by lying in bed all day. I can write only a *very* little in the morning. Have pupped a war poem and some prose. Could we send a dozen of our novels to the Navy: the officers, it seems, have only too much time for reading! And they must weary of the *Strands* and illustrateds people send them. If my War poem gets published by *The Times* (80 lines blank verse) we might make a Broadsheet of it. Unlikely, however, that *Times* will be up to scratch. Do give me news: post is quite safe: about 7 days. Let’s have news of you. Why don’t you send me your novel? ”

He died on January 3rd, 1915.



V



## V

“ **B**Y the way, who *is* Flecker? Is he any good?”

It was Ezra Pound, I remember, who asked me this question, in all good faith, some time after the publication of “The Golden Journey to Samarkand.” The question impressed me because it seemed to emphasise one of Flecker’s most valuable qualities: he was never fashionable, never joined any mutual admiration society, and never depended, for inspiration, upon the reactions of any gang or clique. He met very few of his brother-poets. After his Oxford days he could never be said to have belonged to any particular set; and though he was, with some notable exceptions, generously treated by reviewers (despite his stric-

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tures upon them), he was never boomed by any one circle of critics. I don't suppose that he even knew the names of any of the critics who noticed his books in the principal London papers. The literary people who admired him were scattered, widely divergent types, mostly unknown to one another. As a poet he stood upon his own feet. He followed his own path, looking neither to the right nor to the left, and as soon as he had "found himself" he was apparently but little influenced by any of his contemporaries. Flecker, at a very early age, must have been perfectly conscious that he was a poet; and, having a passion for the art of poetry for its own sake, he set to work to make himself as fine a poet as it was within his nature and capacity to become. Allied with his extraordinary facility went an equally extraordinary power of restraint and of self-criticism; and he knew all about the value of taking pains.

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In his school days and at Oxford, his output of verse was enormous. He imitated all his favourite poets fluently and easily, and probably with a fairly clear notion in his head that these outpourings were metrical exercises and nothing more. As a corrective to his gush of experiment—the first delighted leaps from the earth of one who is determined at last to fly—he early acquired the habit of making translations, and there is no doubt that the labour and concentration involved in them were of immense help to him throughout his life, while the translations themselves, at their best, now form by no means the most negligible part of his “Collected Poems.”

Flecker’s career as a poet is one of unbroken progress up to and including “The Golden Journey to Samarkand.” And if some of the work which followed the publication of this volume seems to show a falling off, it must be ascribed less to any diminu-

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tion of his capacities or inspiration than to the ravages of the disease from which he died. Even so, four poems at least, written after the publication of the "Golden Journey"—"Stillness," "The Pensive Prisoner," "The Old War-ship Ablaze," and "The Old Ships"—are equal to anything he ever did. If the "Collected Poems" has its dull pages, it must always be borne in mind that it contains much the publication or re-publication of which the poet himself never authorised. The "Juvenilia" are, on the whole, of little interest except for the second Glion poem, "Glion-Evening,"—where we have an early indication of his love of precision, of the clear image and the vivid picture as opposed to a lazy, emotional vagueness.

From Glion when the sun declines  
The world below is clear to see :  
I count the escalading pines  
Upon the rocks of Meillerie.

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Like a dull bee the steamer plies  
And settles on the jutting pier :  
The barques, strange sailing butterflies,  
Round idle headlands idly veer.

These two stanzas achieve with success the effect aimed at, and the more closely they are examined the better the workmanship appears. The two remaining stanzas of the poem are not quite up to the same level. “Glion-Evening” is dated July, 1904, and was thus written before the poet was twenty.

It was towards the end of his time at Oxford that Flecker’s real personality first began to show itself in his work. In the first stanza of “A New Year’s Carol,” Flecker sings unmistakably with his own voice :

Awake, awake ! The world is young  
For all its weary years of thought :  
The starest fights must still be fought,  
The most surprising songs be sung.

And to get any real insight into the poet’s

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nature it must also be realised that the poem "Envoy" is equally authentic, equally revealing :

The young men leap, and toss their golden hair,  
Run round the land, or sail across the seas :  
But one was stricken with a sore disease,—  
The lean and swarthy poet of despair.

Know me, the slave of fear and death and shame,  
A sad Comedian, a most tragic Fool,  
Shallow, imperfect, fashioned without rule,  
The doubtful shadow of a demon flame.

His dejections were inevitably the counterpart of his enthusiasms, and could safely be deduced from them, even if he had never given them poetic expression.

Flecker's first volume of verse, "The Bridge of Fire," issued by Mr. Elkin Mathews in his "Vigo Cabinet Series" in 1907, though it contains a good many pieces that the poet himself afterwards suppressed or re-wrote, bears at the same time very vividly the impress of his personality and has in it the promise, at least, of what he was to

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become. We can see, as in “From Grenoble” and “Rioupéroux,” his love for places and for place-names already inspiring him; and he is high-spirited even when he is being “decadent,” and serving us “Kubla Khan” with a dash of absinthe—as in the two sonnets of *Bathrolaire*. These two sonnets must have given him enormous pleasure to write, and his voice, for those who remember it, is audible in every line. They are humorous, imaginative, and extremely adroit, and it seems to me (biassed as I may be by a certain sentimentality) that the years have treated them more kindly than some of the other poems of this period. “The Ballad of Hampstead Heath” is an example of undergraduate humour—brilliant overnight, but rather flat the next morning—and only useful in its place in the “Collected Poems” as a contrast to the careful workmanship surrounding it.

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The faults of taste, occasional cheapness, and mere “cleverness,” which can be found in “The Bridge of Fire” (mingled though they are with a youthful freshness and *élan*), have also their interest, in that they show us, by contrast, how steadily Flecker’s work improved as he grew older. In “The Golden Journey to Samarkand” period he would not have been capable of such a poem as “Mary Magdalen.” And his later version of “Tenebris interlucentem” is an enormous improvement on the one contained in his first printed volume. Not all his alterations and revisions were as successful as this. In the little poem called “We that were Friends” he made a change in the first verse without improving it, while leaving in the second the unfortunate line “whom dreams delight and passions *please*.” (Whatever passions may do, it is difficult to think of them as “pleasing” anybody—except perhaps a fish, to whom a passion might be

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a “pleasing” surprise.) And his blue pencil has failed to delete the epithet “great” in the penultimate line, an epithet which is, to say the least, unhappy. Another alteration which some of those who possess “The Bridge of Fire” will regret occurs in the last verse of “The Ballad of the Student in the South.” The first line of this verse originally ran: “We’re of the people, you and I.” In the version contained in the “Collected Poems” this has been changed to “For we are simple, you and I”—a much weaker, because more “literary,” way of saying the same thing.

In neither “The Bridge of Fire” nor in the much more mature “Forty-Two Poems” can Flecker be said quite to have found himself. Up to 1910 he still wanted, for some unknown reason, to write poems about London, and he retained enough affection for his failures in this direction to print two of the worst. “The Ballad of the Londoner”

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does not come off, while “The Ballad of Camden Town” is perhaps the only one of Flecker’s pieces in which, by wallowing solemnly in false sentiment, he becomes unconsciously funny. In the poems of this first period—with the splendid exceptions of the “Ballad of Iskander,” of “Pillage” and of “The War Song of the Saracens”—it is when he is most subjective, when his poems are most intimate and deeply felt, that he is most successful. As examples, one may quote “The Sentimentalist,” “No Coward’s Song,” “To a Poet a Thousand Years Hence,” and the beautiful “Dulce Lumen, Triste Numen, Suave Lumen Luminum.” The first-mentioned of these poems shows—what is also apparent elsewhere in his work—that Flecker understood the romantic side of friendship as only very few English poets have understood it.

It was not until Flecker went to the

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East, and found in travel in Turkey, Asia Minor, Greece, and among the islands of the *Æ*gean the greatest inspiration of his life, that he really came into his own. “The Golden Journey to Samarkand” is the book of his maturity in which all his finest poetic qualities are displayed. In technique it marks a notable advance. By this time he had formed, or rather adopted, a definite theory of poetry, and it was a theory from the application of which, at that stage of his development, he gained a great deal. That, had he lived through the war, the theory would have been cast aside, there are, at least, indications. But speculations of this sort are fruitless, and it is the work which he actually accomplished which alone concerns us. Not only is Flecker’s own assertion, made in a letter which I have quoted, that the Oriental poems in “The Golden Journey to Samarkand” are “unique in English,” fully justified, but it

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can, I think, be stated that few poems in our literature show a more passionate love of England than “*Brumana*,” a poem, if ever there was one, wrung from the heart by the agony of exile. I quote the opening verse :

Oh shall I never never be home again ?  
Meadows of England shining in the rain  
Spread wide your daisied lawns : your ramparts  
green  
With briar fortify, with blossom screen  
Till my far morning—and O streams that slow  
And pure and deep through plains and playlands go,  
For me your love and all your kingcups store,  
And—dark militia of the southern shore,  
Old fragrant friends—preserve me the last lines  
Of that long saga which you sung me, pines,  
When, lonely boy, beneath the chosen tree  
I listened, with my eyes upon the sea.

By nature, I do not think that Flecker ever had any tendency to be didactic ; but he very likely had a strong inclination to be sentimental and subjective, an inclination which he deliberately restrained and of which he was himself rather afraid. The

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repression which he exercised in this respect has earned for his poetry a reputation for frigidity which is, on the whole, undeserved. He probably adopted his Parnassian theory, in the first instance, as a discipline and a corrective. He knew that both his "feelings" and his verbal exuberance needed pruning and canalising: and the Parnassians offered him precisely what he required.

"A careful study of this theory" (the Parnassian theory), he says, in his preface to "The Golden Journey to Samarkand," "however old-fashioned it may by now have become in France, would, I am convinced, benefit English critics and poets, for both our poetic criticism and our poetry are in chaos. It is a Latin theory, and therefore the more likely to supply the defects of the Saxon genius. . . . The Parnassian school," he continues, "was a classical reaction against the perfervid

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sentimentality and extravagance of some French romantics. The Romantics in France, as in England, had done their powerful work, and infinitely widened the scope and enriched the language of poetry. It remained for the Parnassians to raise the technique of their art to a height which should enable them to express the subtlest ideas in powerful and simple verse. . . . The French Parnassian has a tendency to use traditional forms, and even to employ classical subjects. His desire in writing poetry is to create beauty: his inclination is toward a beauty somewhat statuesque. He is apt to be dramatic and objective rather than intimate. The enemies of the Parnassians have accused them of cultivating unemotional frigidity and upholding an austere view of perfection. The unanswerable answers to all criticism are the works of Hérédia, Leconte de Lisle, Samain, Henri de Régnier, and Jean Moréas. . . .”

Please make the following alteration  
in the MS of The Golden Journey to Samarkand

In the poem called Oak & Olive the 5<sup>th</sup> verse  
(I wonder how ~~in~~ attic seed) to run thus  
I ponder how <sup>from</sup> ~~in~~ attic seed

There grew an English tree:  
How Byron like his heroes file  
Fighting this country free,  
Swinburne took from Shelleys lips  
The kiss of Poetry

9 The first two lines of the next verse should run  
and while our poets chanted Pan  
Back to his pipe and power

CORRECTIONS TO "OAK AND OLIVE," IN FLECKER'S HANDWRITING.



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These passages are not only interesting in themselves, but they illuminate the poet's attitude towards his own work, and enable us to guess that he had as shrewd a notion as anyone could have of his own gifts and weaknesses. Indeed, it may be said that part of Flecker's genius lay in his realisation of his capacities. He knew what he could do, and we rarely find him groping after things which are too high for him. I think it can nowhere be said of him that he "wrought better than he knew"; and to judge from his love of revision and of emendation he seems to have had an almost exaggerated distrust of what Mr. Arthur Symons has somewhere called "the plenary inspiration of first thoughts." His hatred of sloppy writing, "native wood notes," and temperamental gush had its counterpart in his devotion to the Classics, and his resulting desire to create, in his poetry, a "beauty somewhat statuesque,"

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marmoreal, indestructible. Greek names thrilled him all his life, and one can imagine that nothing gave him greater delight than to fit such names as *Hylas*, *Aeolus*, *Oreithyia*, into a setting of verse. But easily traceable as is his love of Greek and Roman poetry throughout all his work, it is possible, nevertheless, that the most fruitful literary influence which inspired him was that of Sir Richard Burton, the whole of whose "*Kasidah*" he had, as a boy, taken the trouble to transcribe. Perhaps one should qualify this by saying that it was not so much Burton as the flavour of Persian and Arabic poetry conveyed to him through Burton, which so fertilised his mind as to make it possible for him, in the fulness of time, to give us "*Gates of Damascus*," the Prologue and Epilogue of "*The Golden Journey to Samarkand*" and his play, "*Hassan*." There is a rare and magical beauty in such lines as these

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which it requires no trained ear to discover :

I am the gate that fears no fall : the Mihrab of  
Damascus wall,

The bridge of booming Sinai : the Arch of Allah all  
in all.

O spiritual pilgrim, rise : the night has grown her  
single horn :

The voices of the souls unborn are half adream with  
Paradise.

To Meccah thou hast turned in prayer with aching  
heart and eyes that burn :

Ah, Hajji, whither wilt thou turn when thou art there,  
when thou art there ?

All through "Gates of Damascus," and  
in such poems as "Saadabad," "Tasmin,"  
and the "Hammam Name," we have the  
East, the real East, as it is given us nowhere  
else in English poetry.

At the time of the publication of "The  
Golden Journey to Samarkand," as has  
been seen, Flecker was already seriously  
ill. Whenever he had any strength to do

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so, he wrote, and when he could not write he lay in bed, dreaming of the great poem which he would accomplish before his eyes closed for ever. The War came to him as the great occasion for which all his life he had been looking, the occasion to which the poet must at all costs rise greatly. “The Burial in England” was his last tremendous effort. He fought for life while he was writing it, fought for strength to finish it. It is an heroic attempt, and thus to his friends there is something sacred about these lines wrung from the poet’s brain by so gigantic an effort of will. Criticism, however, must care nothing for sentiment, and if one can put aside the circumstances in which it was written, one has to admit that the poem is a failure. It strains all through at the big thing, the big effect, and never reaches it. It is *voulu*, laboured: it does not ring true. Its thought has the ephemeral qualities of

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the newspaper leading article at the end of 1914—when leading articles were scarcely endowed with prophetic insight. Peace, “angry and in arms” is represented, we find, by :

The same laughing, invincible, tough men  
Who gave Napoleon Europe like a loaf,  
For slice and portion,—not so long ago !

In cold blood, their change of heart seems unduly rapid. . . . But no : of all poems, this one ought not to be examined in cold blood. It is the last noble gesture of a dying artist, and we can leave it at that.

If Flecker did not succeed in his effort to write a war-poem on the grand scale, at least in two or three of the shorter pieces which he wrote towards the end of his life, he reaches his highest level. The two poems, “Stillness” and “The Pensive Prisoner,” both of them intimate and personal, are among the most beautiful things that he ever produced. And they indicate, also, a

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tendency to free himself from the Parnassian shackles. Here is the last stanza of "Stillness":

Then twittering out in the night my thought-birds flee,  
I am emptied of all my dreams :  
I only hear Earth turning, only see  
Ether's long bankless streams,  
And only know I should drown if you laid not your  
hand on me.

And here the first verse of "The Pensive Prisoner":

My thoughts came drifting down the Prison where I  
lay—  
Through the Windows of their Wings the stars were  
shining—  
The wings bore me away—the russet Wings and grey  
With feathers like the moon-bleached Flowers—I was  
a God reclining :  
Beneath me lay my Body's Chain and all the Dragons  
born of pain  
As I burned through the Prison Roof to walk on Pavement  
shining.

This is not the occasion to attempt to "place" Flecker as a poet. Anything in the nature of a final judgment upon his

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poetry must be left to some professional critic, unmoved by personal memories and aided in his task by that master-critic, Time. My own ideas about Flecker's work have modified in several respects during the seven years which have elapsed since the articles on which this book is based were printed in the now defunct "Academy." What I first regarded as coldness now seems to me to be better described as restraint, a restraint which the poet consciously imposed upon himself. And his apparent materialism, which seemed to me at one time to limit his range, I have come to believe was no more than superficial. Flecker for many years used to be fond of saying that he was an agnostic, and perhaps he thought it was true. But in the last period of his life he definitely returned to Christianity. It is significant that his last present to his mother —sent shortly before his death—was a copy of the New Testament in the Tauchnitz

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edition, which he had specially bound for her, so that it resembled, exactly, his own copy. He was evidently influenced by the “Catholic Reaction” on the Continent (see his letter on page 114), and had come to regard what he calls “childish anti-God rubbish” with impatience, as a kind of vulgarity liable to attack the half-fledged. This point may appear to have but little direct bearing on Flecker’s poetry, but it seems to me essential to an understanding of the man who wrote it.

As a poet, it will be allowed that Flecker’s description of the Parnassians in the Preface to “The Golden Journey to Samarkand” applied also, in the main, to himself. Like the Parnassians he loathed romantic egoism ; like them he had a fine sense of language, using words and epithets with the nicest scholarship and taste ; and again, like them, he preferred as a rule to derive his inspiration from the classics, from history, from

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mythology, from places and from beautiful names, rather than from the details of daily life and personal emotions. As a poet of “actualités” he was rarely a success ; and though his mind was often filled with ideas of writing “magnificent odes”—in honour of King Constantine’s Coronation, or on some similar theme—he was never able successfully to accomplish anything of the sort. His revised version of “God Save the King” is merely funny, with its exotic literary airs and graces—

Till Erin’s Island lawn  
Echoes the duleet-drawn  
Song with a cry of Dawn—  
God Save the King !

—and “The Burial in England” was labour spent in vain. We need not regret these failures, for the inception of such poems—and they only form a small proportion of his work—came evidently from the head rather than from the heart. Perhaps the poems

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were due (despite his Parnassian theory) to a wrong idea of what constitutes a “great” poet—the “great poet” which he was always determined to become.

It was hardly ever “life”—either in its ordinariness or in its strangeness—which Flecker succeeded in transmuting into poetry. His work is an escape from life, and only incidentally an interpretation of it. His emotional range is limited, perhaps deliberately. His greatest strength lies in his power to create pictures compact, clear in outline and rich in colour; and in the haunting music of which he had the secret. “*Emaux et Camées*” would not have made a bad alternative title for his collected poems. There are times when his art seems to resemble that of the jeweller and of the worker in precious metals. His poems, if they rise but rarely to the highest imaginative level, are yet hammered and worked till they attain a hard, indestructible per-

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fection. They have an impressive solidity, and it is difficult to believe that verse of such a character will be quickly forgotten. It depends on nothing transitory for its interest ; and it contains no message to grow stale.

In the generations to come we can imagine that students of Literature will remember of Fleeker that in an age of anarchy in verse he took the trouble to become a master of technique : in an age of formlessness he upheld the finest traditions of form. What was beautiful twenty centuries ago is beautiful still ; and, as Fleeker has told us himself, it was with the single object of creating beauty that his poems were written. Who can read them and imagine for a moment that he failed in his object ? He only failed, as I have suggested, on the rare occasions when he wrote with other aims than this.

It is hard to believe that the glowing visions which Flecker's poems bring before

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the mind will prove any less enchanting to readers in the centuries to come than they are to-day, or that his lines, "To a Poet a Thousand Years Hence," will fail to carry their message through the ages to some craftsman as conscientious as himself :

O friend unseen, unborn, unknown,  
Student of our sweet English tongue,  
Read out my words at night, alone :  
I was a poet, I was young.

Since I can never see your face,  
And never shake you by the hand,  
I send my soul through time and space  
To greet you. You will understand.

# VI



## VI

FLECKER'S published prose works consist of an early fantasy called "The Last Generation," printed by the New Age Press in 1908; "The Grecians: a Dialogue on Education," issued by J. M. Dent and Sons, Ltd. in 1910; his solitary novel, "The King of Alsander" (Max Goschen, 1914); a certain number of stray papers, essays and reviews contributed to periodicals, a selection from which was issued by G. Bell and Sons in 1920, under the title "Collected Prose"; and "The Scholar's Italian Book," an introduction to the study of the Latin origins of Italian, published in 1911 by Mr. David Nutt. Probably, before these lines are in print, "Hassan," his great Oriental play, will have appeared through

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Messrs. Heinemann. There exist also, so I have heard, one or two other plays, possibly unfinished: and, when anyone succeeds in collecting them, there is a further delightful prose volume waiting to be made out of Flecker's letters. As even the few rather business-like specimens which I have been able to give show clearly enough, Flecker was an easy and engaging correspondent, writing frankly from the heart without literary airs and graces, writing, indeed, precisely as he talked. His total output of prose, intended for publication, was in proportion as restricted as his output of verse which he considered worthy of print. With the exception of "*Hassan*," which is in a class by itself, the prose is primarily interesting as shedding a light on the mental make-up, character and personality of the poet. He is at his best when (as in his dialogue, "*The Grecians*") his occasional artificiality of style and excess

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of polish fit in with the general conception and serve to enhance his effects. "The Grecians," which for some reason has suffered almost complete neglect, is one of his most successful prose efforts. And to read it will assist more towards an understanding of the man and of his poetry than any critical commentary or appreciation could hope to do. In it, with complete sincerity, with no poses, he shows us the holy places of his own mind and describes in detail the things which have enriched it. The conversation is staged now at Bologna, now Pistoia, now Florence. The debate is between two schoolmasters, Edwinston the Classic and Hofman the Scientist, and a 'beautiful youth,' called by the unromantic name of Harold Smith, who encounters them at Bologna. The youth listens attentively and sympathetically to what the schoolmasters have to say: and then, with much eloquence, expounds to

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them his ideas on the subject of education. Finally, at their request, he reads them a paper, on "true education," in which he traces out in detail, for Edwinston's and Hofman's benefit, a course of education which he hopes "will appeal to the thoughtful as possible, desirable and sufficient." There is much sound and practical wisdom in this discourse. Flecker was, as we have seen, not only the son of the headmaster of an English public school, but on several occasions himself a schoolmaster. The whole subject of education was one of his deepest and most permanent intellectual interests, and what he has to say in "The Grecians" is the fruit of long thought and considerable experience and inspired by an enthusiastic idealism. There are many passages, particularly those on school discipline, punishment and the treatment of sexual questions which it would be interesting to quote. But Flecker is perhaps most self-

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revealing when he is treating of the literary training which "Harold Smith" proposes to give in his ideal school, to the selected few who shall be judged worthy of it.

"The three great arts," says the 'beautiful youth,' "I would place in this order of educational importance—literature, representation, music. . . . But it is literature which appeals especially to educators as being always a criticism of life, however incomplete we may feel that definition to be: through reading literature we enhance our delight in life. . . . We must, therefore, give our boys the most complete literary training possible, not often worrying them by examinations and commentaries, nor ever dreaming to make them acquainted with all the great books of the world before the age of twenty-one." Of adventure-stories they should be given the best—Stevenson, Kipling, and Conrad, or among the minor writers of romance, Anthony

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Hope, Maurice Hewlett, Gilbert Chesterton. In regard to poetry, “ we will not give even our youngest boys inferior so-called patriotic poetry to read, out of the false conception that such despicable stuff is specially suitable to a childish understanding.” On the other hand, “ we will certainly enliven the interest of the young in verse by giving them to read such good stories as ‘ Sohrab and Rustum,’ ‘ Enid and Geraint,’ or the ‘ White Ship.’ ” He has a good deal to say upon how poetry should be read aloud. “ . . . They shall read with dignity, slowly, with realisation of the beauty of each word, and of how in verse each word has its value, not only of sense, but of sound and association : they shall pause at the end of the lines and mark the metre subtly and not grossly : and all this may be taught to the wise.” He advocates the teaching of English verse, as opposed to the conventional elegiacs and iambics, and, says he, “ we expect our

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boys to write mock Cicero and Tacitus : why, in the name of common sense, can they not write mock Gibbon or Carlyle ? Nor do I think for a minute that these exercises will hinder any from forming in later years an original style, but rather the reverse should happen, for boys so instructed will very clearly understand before they leave us that style is attained by scrupulous care and individuality of expression." The art of verse is to be very diligently taught and the boys are to be initiated " by setting them to write verse translations from poems in other tongues. Our criticism will be ruthless : we shall point out vulgarity of idea, insufficiency of thought, staleness of metaphor, harshness of sound. We shall not necessarily produce great poets by this training, but we shall certainly produce young men who love poetry and (what is rarer still) who understand it. The artist may have an incomplete understanding of

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poetry ; but only the artist can have a complete understanding of it.”

The changes which he advocates in the teaching of Latin and Greek will be heartily endorsed by most English public-schoolboys who have not forgotten hours of unprofitable boredom. “ We shall read very quickly in class, and confine ourselves to works which are either good in themselves, historically interesting, or influential on subsequent thought. We shall divert the young with Homer, easiest of great poets, with Lucian’s ‘ *Vera Historia*,’ with a few legends of old Rome from *Livy*, and with fairy-tales from *Apuleius*. We will not weary even Grecians with *Thucydides* when he talks about dreary expeditions into *Ætolia* ; but all Grecians shall read the fate of the Sicilian expedition, and learn by heart the speech of *Pericles*. Into *Demosthenes* we will only dip ; of *Sophocles* and *Euripides* we will select the finest plays and read them, as well as the

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Æschylean trilogy, more than once. Herodotus we shall read through lightly, as is fitting, and we shall take parts in the plays of Aristophanes in merry congress ; of Plato we shall never weary, for he is good for the soul. Nor shall we presume to forget Theocritus and the lyric fragments, or those unfading roses of the Anthology, which tell how roses fade. And only for the very young shall we Bowdlerise anything, since we are dealing, not with urchins, but with the select and chosen few.

“In Latin we will trouble no reasonable soul with Plautus or Terence, or with more of Cicero than is needed to grasp the excellent style of that second-rate intellect. Of Ovid, too, who is only interesting when immoral, we shall read, for the style’s sake, some of the duller portions. To the claims of those deathless school-books, the *Æneid* of Virgil, the *Odes* of Horace, and the *Satires* of Juvenal, we shall submit, for

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their fame is deserved ; Lucretius and Catullus are too obvious to mention ; Tibullus is a sleepy fellow ; and from Propertius we shall select. Tacitus tells us much history, and is pleasant to read, nor are the letters of Pliny the Younger disagreeable ; but Cæsar I would abandon to the historical specialist, and Livy I would read in haste. Of Apuleius only one book is essentially disagreeable ; the rest is charming, and too long neglected.”

By reading on these lines, the youth maintains that the boys will love the classics more and obtain “a fuller understanding of the classical spirit than those to whom Latin and Greek are a ceaseless drudgery and evil. I believe,” he says, “that they will learn no less than others have learnt, from these time-honoured studies, that calm and even fervour of mind, that sane and serene love of beautiful things, that freedom from religious bigotry and extravagance

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which marks the writings of the Greeks, and that sense of arrangement and justice which marks the writings and still more the history of the Romans.”

Harold Smith is equally explicit and interesting in his remarks upon what books should be read and what classical works avoided, in the study by his Grecians of French, German, and Italian. His observations upon the Italian language and upon Italy may be taken as expressing one of the strongest of Flecker’s enthusiasms. I quote the passage in full, because of the clear light it casts upon Flecker’s personality.

“ Italian we shall reinvest with the honour and importance which it has so unjustly lost since the first half of the nineteenth century. In the days of Peacock no gentleman with any pretension of culture could afford to dispense with a smattering of this delightful tongue, whose literature we now imagine

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to be represented by Dante, Petrarch, and the 'Promessi Sposi' of Manzoni. It is sad to think that there are now not a hundred living Englishmen who know and enjoy the calm and classic humour of Ariosto, or who care anything for the countless masters of early Italian lyrical verse, which Eugenia Levi has collected in her two fascinating volumes. Yet no classical scholar can be excused for not taking the trouble to learn to read this easiest of languages, when a fortnight's work will enable him to read any average Italian prose with fluency and enjoyment.

"Our boys shall know a great deal of Dante, a little of Petrarch, the two great collections of Italian verse to which we have referred, besides a little anthology of Carducci, which extends to the nineteenth century; nor shall they neglect to read the splendid 'Barbarous Odes' of Carducci himself, which, based on the Horatian metres, form so brave a protest against the natural

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deficiency of a tongue wherein rhymes are too easy and compression too hard. Several of the tales of Boccaccio, even some of Bandello and Masuccio, claim consideration, for they do not all consist, as some imagine, of indecent ribaldry, but are full of pathos, humour, and most cunning psychological observation ; and why neglect the ‘*Cortigiano*’ ? Our playwrights shall be Goldoni and D’Annunzio : perhaps not the D’Annunzio of the terrible ‘*Città Morta*,’ but certainly the D’Annunzio of ‘*Francesca da Rimini*.’ For are we not the heirs of the Italian Renaissance, and shall we continue to neglect a literature not inferior to the French and far greater than the German, a literature which in the present age has produced at least two immortal names ? Least of all can we dream of so doing, after gazing at the masterpieces of Italian painting. Would it not be well to know what these great men read, thought, and wrote ?

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Have we forgotten that Italy is also the first, and will perhaps be the last, home of the purest and most noble music? To understand the spirit of the greatest artistic country the world has ever known, greater, in my opinion, than Greece herself, by virtue of Leonardo and Michelangelo, not to mention Scarlatti and Pergolesi, is surely the direct duty of anyone who desires to enjoy all that life can offer, and to assist others to share his delight."

These long extracts have been given primarily for the purpose of showing the importance of "The Grecians" to anyone who wishes to appreciate fully the quality and nature of the poet's mind. I hope, however, that they may have the effect of sending readers to the book itself. The point of view is, perhaps, likely to become old-fashioned, and the literary judgments expressed in it, in the main so just and

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sound, may run counter to the taste or preferences of the future, for taste is always changing. But the quality of sincerity the dialogue will always have, and it is nowhere seen to better advantage than in the concluding sentences of the discourse :

“ But we will re-found *La Giocosa*, and build it anew in England beside the sea that typifies our race. And if I have made no single direct reference to patriotism, let me say this now. Patriotism is not taught by bad poetry and bad literature, by rifle-clubs, or Union Jacks, or essays on Tariff Reform. *La Giocosa* will give England men of intelligence, fit to govern her, and not private soldiers fit to be shot down for her in some financial war. And in training Grecians *La Giocosa* has fulfilled her duty to England. Ours shall be no ideal school for the ideal youth, but a place where hard work is done, and where boys are toilfully

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prepared for the difficulties of a modern world ; yet where, too, we shall train many to understand and love the sweet pleasures of the senses. We even hope that a few of our scholars will be among the great. Now, my friends, our long and toilsome journey is over : and it is evening.”

“ The King of Alsander,” Flecker’s solitary novel, has always seemed to me, since I first read it in its entirety, an unsatisfactory and unequal performance. It has some beautiful passages and many amusing ones, but it never quite “ comes off.” The high spirits are only intermittent, and there are some dismal slabs of “ fine writing ” which destroy all effect of spontaneity. Flecker, like most poets, had a tendency to adorn his prose too richly. It is just as difficult for English prose to wear jewels with success, as it is for an Englishman to wear diamond studs in his shirt front ; and Flecker did not

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always restrain his liking for the purple patch. He is, perhaps, at his best as a prose stylist in some of his critical studies, in those two charming papers "Mansur" and "Pentelicus," and in such vigorous outpourings as *Philanthropists*. Both "The Last Generation"—a story issued as a pamphlet by the New Age Press in 1908, and begun while the author was at Oxford—and the brief sketch called "N'Jawk," illustrate very happily Flecker's love of the fantastic and the grotesque. "N'Jawk" is a delicious trifle, as amusing to-day as when I first read it in typescript fifteen years ago. It makes one wish that instead of spending months and years of toil over "The King of Alsander," Flecker had devoted the same amount of energy to writing a series of these fantastic sketches, which would have made a volume not unworthy of the poet, and interesting as illustrating his irony and wit.

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In his critical studies, Flecker gives voice to his literary preferences and opinions with characteristic impetuousness and vigour, and these pages in his “Collected Prose” are extremely readable and illuminating. Some of his enthusiasms it is not easy to share, and occasionally his abuse and denunciations seem excessive. One gets the impression that he divided authors into those who were “magnificent” and those who wrote “God-forsaken formless muck.” Writing, for example, of William Watson, he says: “The temporary reputation acquired by Mr. Watson is particularly pernicious to the well-being of Poetry; and it is ridiculous as well as aggravating that any notice should be taken of his pompous outcries.” But in the same essay from which this is taken he shows, in observation after observation, that there is technical knowledge and sound sense behind his damning and his praising. Of Mr. Housman, the author of the “Shrop-

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shire Lad" (a volume by which he was considerably influenced and from which he learnt much), he writes: "Within metres almost as limited and simple as those employed with ascetic choice by the author of 'Emaux et Camées,' Mr. Housman exhibits a great subtlety of workmanship. It would not only be dreadfully prosaic, but also rather unfair to expose at any length his wizard tricks. The infinite joys that all true lovers of poetry find in the deft manipulation of verbal sounds are almost too sacred for explanation. Let a short poem be quoted, almost at random:

Now hollow fires burn out to black  
And lights are gathering low.  
Square your shoulders, lift your pack,  
And leave your friends and go.

O never fear, man : naught's to dread,  
Look not left nor right.  
In all the endless roads you tread  
There's nothing but the night.

The quiet and forcible alliterations of the

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first and last lines, the surprising vigour of the third, the impressive slowness of the fifth line is remarkable. There is, moreover, an art in the juxtaposition of sounds about which it is rather sacrilegious to talk, not because of any superhuman merit in this particular poem, but because the art of melody is one of suggestion, and not of code." Here is one poet writing about another with the accent of authority. He can say with impunity much that the layman would scarcely dare to say even if he thought it. Flecker may not always be right, but his opinions have at least an intrinsic and lasting interest.

Of the art of criticism in general Flecker took a very high view. In his essay on "The Public as Art Critic," he gives a brief but illuminating sketch of the ideal critic of poetry. "The critic of poetry must know all the *minutiæ* of the technique, not so much that he may be able to carp at

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faults as that he may realise perfection. He must know his art so well that he feels at once and instinctively, not after reflection merely, whether the lines he is reading ring true. Yet he must not be a pedant: he must have deep experience of life, he must be a man of character. In the true sense of the word he must be moral. He must prepare for his task austere: it is a high one. He must cast aside for an hour his own puritanism and prejudice, his petty, even his noble beliefs about the world, and become receptive of the impressions of others to the extreme limit of human nature. . . . The critic must be of purer mould than the poet himself. He must have a profound love for man, not the vague enthusiasm of the humanitarian but a vivid delight in all the men in the world, men sinful, men splendid, men coarse, or cowardly, or pathetic. And in all the phenomena of nature, sordid or shining,

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the background to our tragedy, he must admire, if not the beauty, then the force, the law, the cruelty, and the power. And with this enthusiasm in his soul he will bitterly condemn dullness, weakness, bad workmanship, vulgar thought, shoddy sentiment as being slanders on mankind ; and in this sense and this sense only—that it is the glory of man—great art is moral.”

This passage is an additional illustration of the fact that there must always be a strain, at least, of true “nobility” in every fine artist, and that Flecker had very much more than a strain of it in him.

Of Flecker’s play, “Hassan,” which in years to come may be considered his masterpiece—so wonderfully is it compounded of poetry and farce, of the fantastic and the beautiful—it is too early yet to speak in detail. I read the MS. of the play in bed—in the hotel in Paris in which Oscar Wilde died—on a rainy January morning. I had

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to read it hastily, because the MS. was required of me and I was unable to prolong my stay in France. Before one will have a chance of judging it adequately it must be seen in its printed form, and it must be seen upon the stage, produced, as near as may be, in accordance with Flecker's ideas. It is to be hoped that, at no very distant date, it may be possible to do both these things. Then, unless the impressions which I gained from the MS. were utterly mistaken, the wider public to whom Flecker is still all but unknown will begin to realise what manner of man it is whose work they have been content for so long to neglect.

Flecker is a poet who has had to wait a long time for that recognition and acceptance which is his due. But when at last he receives it one may be forgiven for believing that the recognition will be general among educated people : and the acceptance permanent.



VII



## VII

[The following appreciation of James Elroy Flecker was written by Mr. John Mavrogordato at Florence, on January 14, 1915, less than a fortnight after the poet's death. He has kindly given me permission to print it here.—D.G.]

HERE was something so essentially youthful about the enthusiasm of J. E. Flecker's poetry that some critics may say that his early death was not unexpected. Poetry for him, as for Keats, meant always a passionate love of beauty, a passionate and impatient love. He was more fortunate than Keats in that his consular appointments took him to many of the actual places of his coloured dreams ; but his body was being slowly consumed by

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the tainted flames of the same disease. His last years were spent between his work in Turkey and periods of partial recovery in England ; until the last attack sent him last summer to Davos, where he died.

The work of a vice-consul in the British Levant Consular service is underpaid, of course, and not as exciting as it sounds. He often longed for English talk and English books and the low-toned English country ; and one of his poems, written in the Lebanon, tells how he used to dream of England in his Turkish exile, just as he had dreamed in England of the East. Some of the few exciting incidents of his official career he described in an article, as far as I know his last published work, which appeared in *The New Statesman* a few weeks ago.

But if his early death was only shocking as the inevitable end must always be, it was, indeed, a bitter surprise to find it announced in six inches of *The Times* as a

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“Loss to English Poetry.” I don’t mean to say that the papers were quite unappreciative during his lifetime. They were, on the whole, as kind as the press of any nation, with the possible exception of France, is expected to be to any young poet. The average reviewer is not a detector of genius, but only the shop-walker of journalism, the usher of the so-called “reading public”: and the public’s attitude to poetry is that of the Italian housekeeper who lately reproached one who went to market and came home with an armful of flowers—“*Molto bello*, but why spend money to get a headache?” Flecker’s books were well, if sparsely, noticed, and his poems were occasionally published in the best reviews. But few will believe, especially when they read the columns of praise that will presently appear, the insults and delays he was compelled to suffer, submitting his works, as he was nearly always bound to, from a

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distance, and depending for the most part on flights of letters and postcards to remind editors of his existence. Only at the end of July [1914] he wrote to me characteristically on a postcard :

“ Damn Austria. Also damn —.\* Could you please be so monstrous kind as to rescue my ‘ Paul Fort ’ MS. I can’t get a word out of him. I am horribly ill and can hardly write. Hope some day to finish ‘ Ode on Greece.’ The savage bitterness of its preface would relieve me. . . . Why don’t the Hellenic League protest against —’s pompous ineptitudes? . . . All I can do is a few lines of translation of ‘ Virgil.’ . . .”

I don’t know whether the article on “ Paul Fort ” was ever published, by that or by some other editor; it would certainly be interesting to read a criticism of

\* An editor.

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France's *prince des poètes*, written by the most individual among England's younger poets, differing as they do in style and temperament. Paul Fort's every thought seems to run naturally into a rhythmic exuberance, while Flecker's had to be strained by a fine sense of language and refined till it could shine with beauty's clearest ray.

He was a scholar and always a student of languages. "What can they know of English who only English know?" being for him the best misquotation of that much-abused aphorism. So he was a great reader of the modern as well as of the Oriental and classical tongues. Only for him a knowledge of French must include the power to appreciate the experiments of Moréas and the squibs of Georges Courceline, just as any valuable reading of Latin was bound to extend to Petronius and Apuleius.

This view of Greek and Latin studies, shared, indeed, by some Oxford and Cam-

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bridge scholars, but not generally by school-masters, he put forward in a charming dialogue on the ideal public-school education, called “The Grecians”: it was published by Dent about five years ago, and immediately forgotten. Towards the better study of modern languages he wrote, besides a number of translations, an Italian grammar “for scholars,” in which an outline of the grammar, explained where possible by reference to the corresponding Latin forms, was supplemented by a short anthology of Italian literature, from Dante and Boccaccio to d’Annunzio and Carducci. (He sold the copyright for a few pounds, and had the annoyance not only of not being allowed to see proofs, but also of having his work revised by another hand before it was published under his name.)

His only other prose work\* was the

\* Not to mention a few scattered articles and reviews, one, for instance, on the early work of Mr. J. C. Snaith, and an early pamphlet called, I think, “The Last Generation.”

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picaresque, or, as some would prefer to call it, Ruritanian novel, “The King of Al-sander,” a work of very personal charm, although the clear vision of romance that makes the opening chapter so uncommonly alluring is confused by some dusty and gruesome incidents, as, for that matter, is the masterpiece of Apuleius to whom the author here confessed his devotion.

There used to be among his manuscripts a couple of plays, of course unproduced ; one a fantastic tragedy on a “Don Juan” theme, the other an heroic farce in an atmosphere of the “Arabian Nights.”

There remain the poems, four thin volumes, of which the second and third contain almost the same pieces, and the last two practically all the best of his poetical work. Among these forty or fifty poems it is hard to indicate the best to those who do not already know them. But one remembers specially his reproductions of

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Oriental metrical forms : there is, for instance, a gh'azel (if that is the way to transliterate it) to “Yasmin” which contains all the fainting loveliness of the East without falling into the sickly convention of the bulbul and the rose. Flecker's diction was never extravagant. He understood the rule that any inversion is sudden death to a modern lyric. Similarly, his imagery, however exquisitely conceived or expressed, was always based on the simplicity of ordinary perceptions : the common life and business of the East, the ordinary but magic love of a young man, the forms and colours and emanating emotions of trees and hills and sea—

“ the dragon-green, the luminous, the dark,  
the serpent-haunted sea.”

All his poems are the work of a scholar. Not because they make any show of pedantry or erudition, but because they seem to have been conceived in a mind accus-  
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tomed to classic shapes : each poem, that is, seems to have a form of its own, pre-existent in the mind, after a melodic pattern laid up in heaven, like the form of a Greek statue pre-existent in the tranquillity of Pentelicus. Scholarship, too, has chosen the diction. The history and associations of every word, as well as the absolute sound, seem to contribute to the effect, as, of course, they should. Words in poetry should be hard, with a clear-cut, gem-like outline ; but in some of these poems, without ever becoming soft like the vague predication of some of our modern mystics, the language combines this classical purity and definiteness of shape with a lustre like that of a pearl.

It is to be hoped that some attempt will be made to collect Flecker's scattered pieces ; even the plays might be published, as they would give some idea of the robust humour that was part of his character.

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His life was not easy, but he found, as poets do, an intenser enjoyment of it than ordinary men ; and he was happy in the power to put the essence of this into his writing. So his work is the proper memorial of the tall and foreign-looking figure, dark-eyed, and shyly excitable, that passed in a few years from Oxford and Cambridge to Smyrna, from the Cotswold Sanatorium again to Beyrouth, and then tragically to Switzerland.

He was a clear soul burning with many flames, loving physical beauty in many forms, and longing always to immortalise it in words. He will not be forgotten.

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The Story of Hassan of Bagdad and how he came  
to make the Golden Journey to Samarkand,  
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[Awaiting publication.]

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